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Complete Book-Length Novel By Gil Campbell

FIRST MAGAZINE PUBLICATION

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Here's new amazing mouth comfort without risking a single cent . . . enjoy that feeling of having your own teeth again. Its efficaciousness is attested to by hundreds of users who enthusiastically praise Crown Plate Reliner . . . you, too, will join this happy army if you will just try Crown once. Satisfy your desire for food . . . eat what you want . . . yes, comfortably eat foods you have been deprived of such as steak, corn, apples, etc. Use Crown Plate Reliner and again make eating a pleasure. **Remember Crown Reliner tightens false teeth or no cost.** Perfect for partials, lowers and uppers.

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BLUE RIBBON
WESTERN

Volume 9 June, 1946 Number 1

SMASHING BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

(First Magazine Publication)

TRAIL TO BANG-UP ..... By Cliff Campbell 10

Once he had been Quentin Bellew III, scion of wealth and luxury in the East; but now he was nobody, and a hunted man, wanted by the law for murder. And the only way to even a resemblance of safety lay in taking on a job with a wagon-trail which taxed the endurance of the toughest men to the uttermost, and offered death for wages.

SHORT STORIES

RAW, MEDIUM, AND WELL DONE ..... By Tom Thursday 87

Step up folks, and meet Professor Flutterbutt, who's got a scheme which makes working for a living look downright silly—and it's perfectly legal, too!

BULLETS FOR A WATER-BOY ..... By Lee Floren 93

The kid didn't like being pushed around by the boss of the construction crew, but he had to keep a job in hopes of getting his brother out of jail.

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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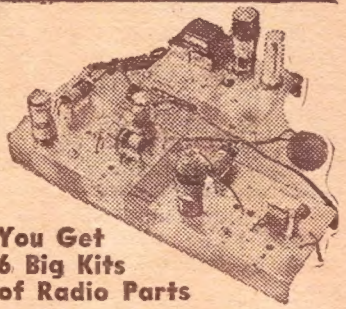

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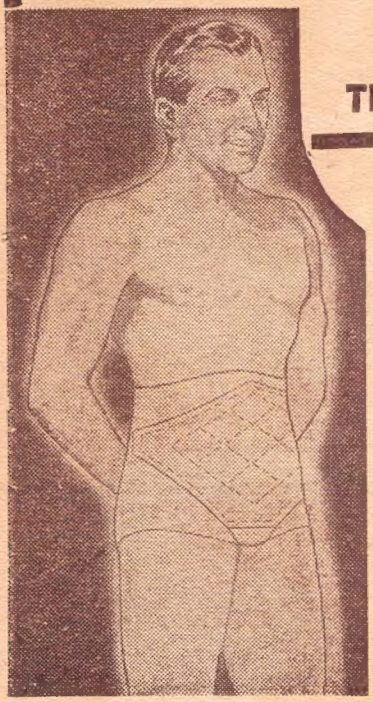
The Amazing NEW Abdominal Supporter



MAKE THIS TEST WITH YOUR OWN HANDS AND FEEL WHAT WE MEAN

Yes, instantly you, too, can begin to feel ALIVE . . . ON TOP OF THE WORLD by joining the Parade of Men who are marching up the highway of happier living with the COMMANDER, the amazing new Men's abdominal supporter.

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The helpful uplifting EXTRA SUPPORTING power of the COMMANDER firmly supports abdominal sag. The instant you pull on the belt you breathe easier . . . your wind is longer . . . you feel better!

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The COMMANDER braces your figure . . . you look and feel slimmer . . . your clothes fit you better. Your friends will notice the improvement immediately.

COMMANDER IS NEW AND MODERN!
The absence of gouging steel ribs, dangling buckles and bothersome laces will prove a joy. COMMANDER has a real man's jock type pouch. IT GIVES GENUINE MALE PROTECTION. Try this amazing new belt with full confidence . . . and at our risk. SEND FOR IT NOW!

*THE SECRET OF THE "INTERLOCKING HANDS"

Only COMMANDER contains this NEW principle. A porous non-stretch material is built into the Special stretch body of the COMMANDER . . . in the outline of two interlocking hands for EXTRA DOUBLE SUPPORT where you need it most. **NO BUCKLES, LACES OR STRAPS.**

Commander Wearers all over America Say—

"I am sure you will be pleased to know that it is by far the best and most practical supporter I have ever had. I have been pleased to show it to several of my friends and they are likewise impressed with it. You shall probably hear from some of them in the future."
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"Enclosed find order for another belt. I wouldn't be without this supporter for ten times what it costs."
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"Received the Commander about a week ago. To say that I am well pleased with it would be putting it mildly—I can see that it fills a long felt want, giving the needed support and a most comfortable feeling. I never miss putting it on the first thing in the morning. Enclosed is my check for another."
J. C. McG.
St. Paul, Minn.

"I recommend the Commander for what it is made for. It sure has been a great help to me. I want to thank you for what it has done. I might add it has helped me more than anything I have ever tried."
F. N.
Fort Knox, Ky.

Above are just a few of the many unsolicited testimonials for the Commander that we receive regularly. Originals of these and others are on file.

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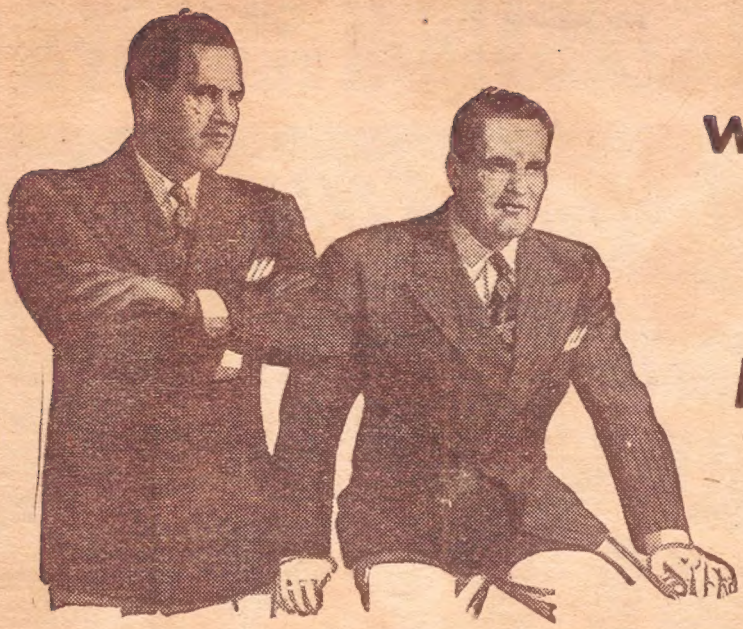

If YOU were Boss would YOU promote "YOU"?

Be honest now—

suppose that a better job had opened up in your company—carrying with it promotion and more money—could you qualify?

If you were boss, would you select "YOU" for that better job?

Consider before you answer.

First of all, could you *fill* the job? Has your experience fitted you for the step forward—have you been preparing for promotion apart from experience gained on the job?

Or have you just been filling a niche, doing daily tasks well but making no real and intelligent effort to learn and qualify for the job ahead so that if an opening should occur you would be ready to fill it?

The man who gets real promotion is the one who makes his own breaks—the man who slaves in the ordinary job at low pay just wishes and dreams of promotion and more money. Which are you?

Business is always willing to pay the man who knows—and pay him well. The man who is ready and willing to take responsibilities—and capable of directing the efforts of other men is a valuable asset to any business organization. He never wants for a good job and above average earnings. He gets ahead.

We have helped thousands of men achieve promotion and more money—success sometimes beyond their dreams—a success that was started by a coupon similar to the one below.

Get out of that rut—don't be satisfied with a mediocre job at small pay—be a success in business—this coupon may be your first step.

So send it today—right now—tomorrow never comes for the man who consistently puts things off.

La Salle Extension University

A Correspondence Institution

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What a drink! . . . the richest, mellowest wine you've ever tasted. High alcoholic content, yet so delicate and smooth you'll kick yourself for what you've been missing all these years in real wine enjoyment . . . and — think of it — at only a few pennies a quart. What a treat for your friends. All you do is follow a centuries' old secret formula of the Old World Monastery Monks who were truly master wine makers. Without long waiting, you'll have a supply of the finest wine ever. No fuss. No bother. Ingredients can be purchased anywhere. Your Government permits you to make up to 200 gallons of wine a year — tax free — for your own use. For easy detailed directions, simply fill in the coupon, attach $1.00, cash or money order, and mail off at once. It will be the best $1.00 investment you ever made.

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DON'T MURDER YOUR SKIN!

Squeezing your skin to force out your pimples or blackheads may be injurious; leaving your skin with unsightly, embarrassing blemishes. Now, there is an easy, safe, harmless way that helps you rid your face of ugly, offensive, externally-caused skin troubles. *You merely follow a doctor's simple directions.*

You, or almost any man, can easily have a natural, healthy, normal complexion, free from externally-caused skin troubles, by just giving your skin the special care that handsome screen stars give theirs. It's really very simple—as easy as washing your face. The whole secret is in washing your face in a way that thoroughly cleanses the pores of your skin of every last speck of dirt and grime that often get deep into the pores and may frequently cause you skin troubles. Ordinary washing with ordinary soaps may not do this. You should use a highly-concentrated soap like VIDERM SKIN CLEANSER that penetrates the pores and acts as an antiseptic. When followed by a quick application of VIDERM MEDICATED SKIN CREAM, specks of irritating dirt and grime are quickly washed out, dissolve and disappear, leaving your skin clean, clear and free from things that often cause pimples, blackheads, and other externally-caused skin troubles.

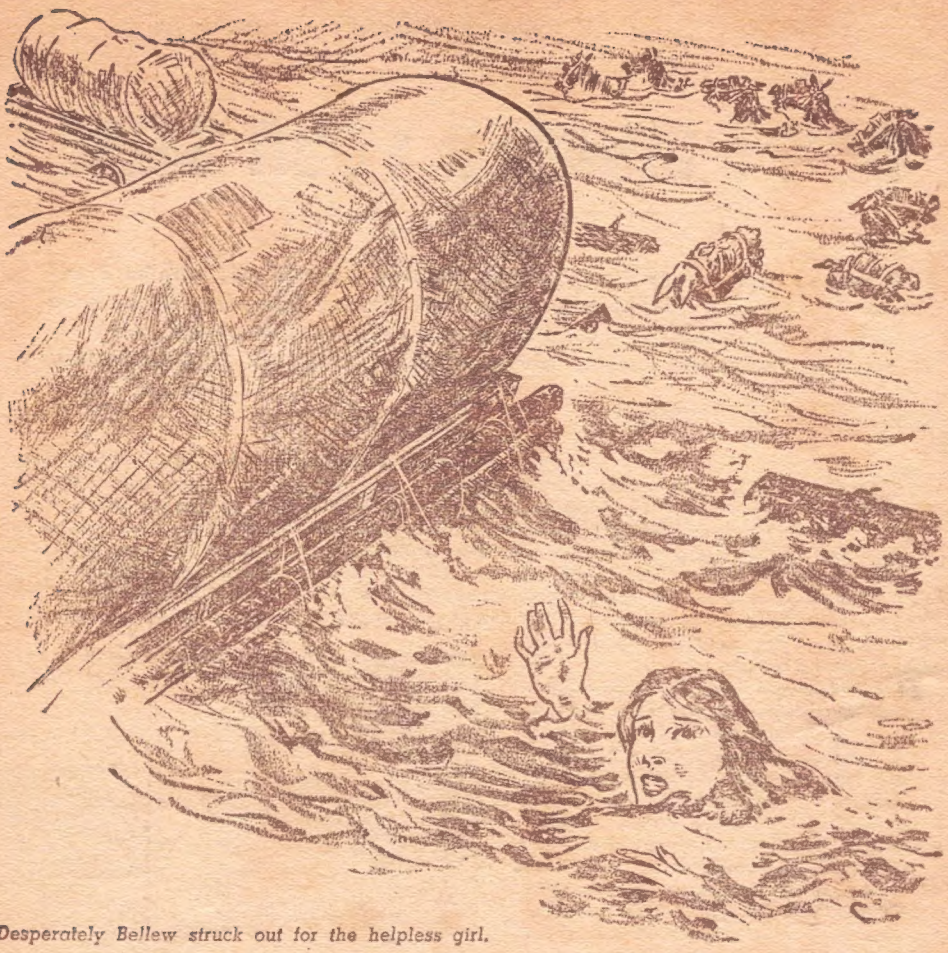
It doesn't pay to risk marred skin, blotches, blemishes. Your very success in business, love and social life may depend upon your looks. *Handsomeness and a good appearance usually start with the condition of your skin.* Nobody likes a skin that looks unhealthy, unclean, abused, and marked with blackheads or pimples. WOMEN ARE ATTRACTED TO MEN WHO HAVE SMOOTH, CLEAR, ROBUST-LOOKING SKIN. Business executives don't choose men who have a poor-looking complexion. Don't take chances with your success in life when this inexpensive VIDERM formula may help you. *Don't murder your skin!* Here's all you have to do to keep smooth, clear skin. Use VIDERM SKIN CLEANSER when you wash your face. Rub the rich lather of this highly-concentrated soap on your face for just a few seconds and then rinse it off. Apply a little VIDERM MEDICATED SKIN CREAM and that's all there is to it. VIDERM MEDICATED SKIN CREAM quickly disappears, leaving your skin nice and smooth. This simple treatment used after shaving helps heal tiny nicks and cuts, relieves razor-burn and smarting besides conditioning your skin.

Stop worrying and being embarrassed over what may happen to your skin. Just mail your coupon for your VIDERM DOUBLE TREATMENT this minute, and be confident that you will keep a smooth and clear complexion. Follow the simple directions (written by a doctor) that you will get with your VIDERM DOUBLE TREATMENT; then look in your mirror and listen to your friends tell you that you have the smooth, clear skin — the kind that women go for.

Just mail your name and address to The New York Skin Laboratory, 206 Division Street, Dept. 406 New York City 2, New York. By return mail you will receive both of the Viderm formulas, with full directions for using Viderm Skin Cleanser and Viderm Fortified Medicated Skin Cream. The doctor's directions and both jars are packed in a sealed carton, safety sealed. On delivery, pay two dollars plus postage. If you wish, you can save the postage fee by mailing your two dollars with your letter.

Women don't like a messy-looking skin. Success in Romance, Business and Socially comes easier if you have a clear, smooth skin. It helps you every minute to more pleasure and success.

If you are in any way dissatisfied, your money will be cheerfully refunded. Both of the formulas you use have been fully tested and proven, and are reliable for you. If they don't help you your treatments cost you nothing. After you have received your Viderm, if you have any questions to ask concerning abused skin, just send them in.



Desperately Bellew struck out for the helpless girl.

The pampered son of a wealthy Eastern family, Quentin Bellew found himself quite suddenly on his own, a fugitive from justice. And he had to admit wryly that the word 'tenderfoot' might have been invented just especially to describe him, as he enlisted in an expedition from which the toughest would have shrunk!

CHAPTER I

Edge of the Wilderness

HELL ROARING was aptly named. Every one of its nine saloons was crowded, and there had been three separate shootings since morning, with none attracting more than momentary attention. The board sidewalks clattered constantly to the thump of high-heeled or hobnailed boots and the jingle of spurs. And where the sidewalks ended, the mud was literally packed by the press of feet.

Since Hell Roaring was thirty miles to the north of the line of steel, it was a source of supply, and

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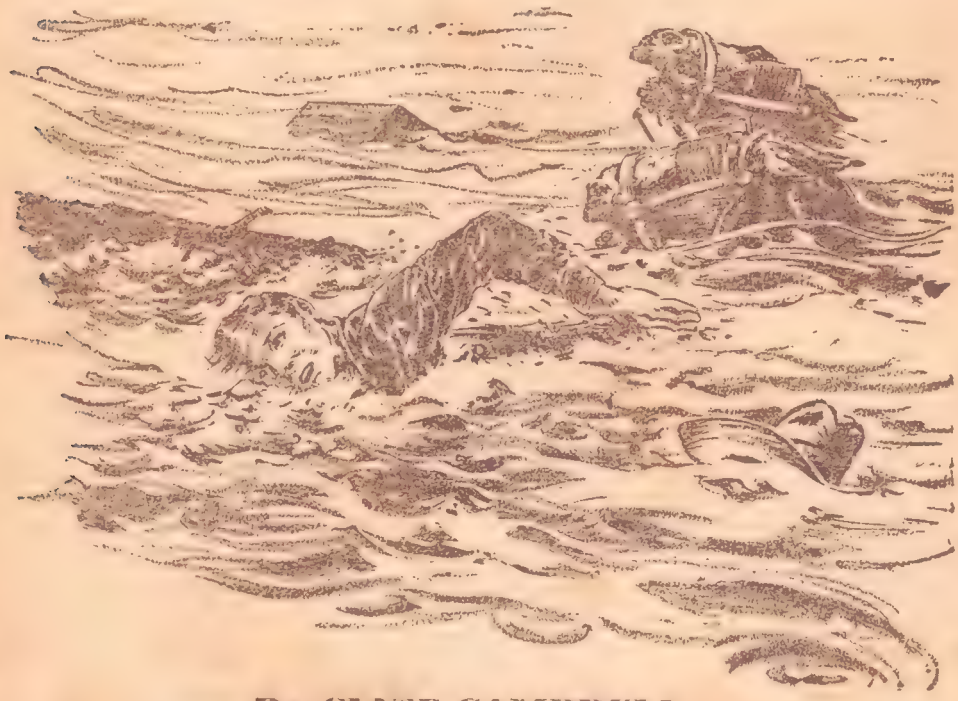
TRAIL TO BANG-UP



By CLIFF CAMPBELL

that supply had to come and go principally by freighter strings. There were three trains of jerk-line wagons in Hell Roaring today—one incoming from the railroad, one pulling laboriously out along a regular route and churning the already rutted streets to a bottomless nightmare of mud, and a third in the process of loading for an early departure.

Here was a cosmopolitan crowd, such as could be found no other place on earth, save at other similar camps. Of all this vast throng, Quentin Bellew had the conviction that he was the strangest, the most homesick and altogether the most desolate of them all; and he admitted, ruefully, that of the tenderfeet who fared like bleating sheep among the wolves, he was probably the veriest *chechaco* of the flock.

Ruefully he looked at his hands—large, capable-looking hands, but scrupulously well-tended; hands which proclaimed that they had never done a day's physical labor.

Rather grimly he continued the in-

spection of himself, in the big, bullet-cracked mirror of the Gay Maiden Bar. Broad shoulders; a chin jutting half in pride, half in defiance; blue eyes which tried to share that defiance and hide the timidity, the utter loneliness of soul and crowding terror which possessed him; well-cut, night black hair above.

From these his survey went on to the sheepskin jacket which encased the upper part of the six-foot frame of him, the red-and-black-checked flannel shirt, open at the throat, tucked into staringly new blue overalls which were in turn encased in high-laced boots, a bit muddy but likewise new. His glance roved back to the sagging cartridge belt around his middle and the ponderous forty-five Colts which dragged it down. He shifted that weighty encumbrance furtively, his eyes a little askance. All of this was strange and not at all reassuring.

"I'm free, and twenty-six," he assured himself grimly. "And I look like a man. But, Lord help me, I never felt less like one."

He nodded again to his reflection, half sardonically.

"One thing sure, anybody who sees me in this get-up will go some if they ever associate this bum with Quentin Bellew, late of Quincy," he reflected. "And this, you damned coward, is what your running has brought you to!"

SELF-SCORN was burning in his eyes as he picked his way out of the saloon to the sidewalk and stood there in the rain, staring about. He had been in Hell Roaring for two days now, and still the scene was strange in his eyes.

Off a little way, the double doors of a big frame warehouse yawned wide, and here, careless of the rain, men were at work, some unloading freight from the long string of wagons which had come in that morning, carrying it somewhere back in the shadowy recesses of the building. Everybody in Hell Roaring moved to good purpose except himself, Bellew reflected.

Some were carrying freight out and loading it under stretched out canvas tarps on the drawn up wagons of the other jerk-line freighter string. Bellew studied them curiously. These were huge wagons, with broad wheels as high as a man, equipped regularly with double-boxes, and with two tiers of rough lumber boxes added on to these.

Into this huge maw the freight seemed to go endlessly, until it was finally piled high above the top of the box, the bulging, dirty canvas stretched above it, the driver's seat in front pitilessly exposed to wind and weather.

It was flour which was being loaded now—hundred-pound sacks going into the maw of that box. Bellew made a quick mathematical calculation at the final load, and was a little staggered. It was a heavy, well-built wagon, and there were eight horses ahead of it—big draft horses, these, not range cayuses. But even at that, he wondered briefly how they could ever stir such a load.

Then he considered the men who were stooping, bending above flour sacks, hoisting one to their shoulders with a quick expert heave, walking out to the wagon, repeating this endlessly and apparently without much effort. The operation fascinated him, set him wondering if he could do it himself.

It looked easy enough—and these men were no bigger than he was. Some of them, such as that wiry little oldster with the ragged, tobacco-stained beard, were considerably smaller.

Bellew sidled into the warehouse, to a corner where no one was at work. He bent over, seized a sack of flour as he had seen others do and swung it with a quick lift.

Somewhat to his surprise, he got it to his shoulder, but it felt as if something had torn in his back at the same time, almost the way a shirt rips with sudden strain. With it on his shoulder and himself in a stooping position, he tried to straighten again, and found himself staggering.

For a moment he wavered wildly, then spun around dizzily and dropped the sack. Straightening he stared

ruefully at it. His back was slowly coming back to normal, but there was scorn in him, and amazement, that a hundred pounds could be so heavy and so concentrated. He looked quickly around to make sure that no one had seen him.

Then, grimly, he bent over again. This time, uffing and struggling, he managed it—not with the sack across his shoulder, but in his arms. He stood up, lifted it, juggled it furiously, slid it onto his shoulder, and walked, or staggered, a dozen paces, before setting it down again.

"Just the same, I did it," he growled, with a slight tingling of pride, then stared ruefully to where the others were packing sack after sack, purely as a matter of routine. His eyes widened as a newcomer shouldered through the door, carelessly shaking himself free of some of the rain.

HE WAS an eye-compelling figure, even in such a camp as Hell Roaring. No taller than Bellew, he was built broad and solid, and he seemed to bulge with muscle, like a grizzly bear. The similarity went further. A short, ragged beard covered most of his face, his hair was rather long, and hair and beard alike were of a grizzly red. There was a rough joviality in his face, he had little sharp eyes, and men hailed him, some as Grizzly, others as Brent. Bellew stared at him with new interest. He had heard of Grizzly Brent.

Few men could remain in Hell Roaring for forty-eight hours and fail to do so. For even in such a town of personages, Grizzly Brent was outstanding. He was said to own the biggest freight line in and out, and it was the freighters who were getting rich these days. Grizzly, if report spoke true, owned the big string which was now loading.

He paused for a moment, surveying operations with a bright, knowing eye, utilizing the opportunity to stuff a short pipe with tobacco, cramming it down with a gnarled and stubby forefinger. His nose above it was broad and flattened, the pipe almost lost among the whiskers as he had it alight.

Then he turned, pivoting on his heel, cat-like, at some remark. A big, burly French-Canadian had challenged him boisterously.

"Hi, you Greezly," he roared. "They say you strong man, heh? By gar, I bet you that I, me, Jacques LeMoyne, I leeft more than w'at you can, hey?"

"Think so, Frenchy?" Grizzly stared, a slow grin, anticipatory but not at all mirthful, splitting his whiskers a little. "What you bet, eh?"

"I bet you month's wages, yah!" Frenchy roared, and opened his mouth to expand in roaring laughter. "Me, I use the money to buy my girl somet'ing pretty nice, heh?"

"You mean you'll have to work this trip without getting drunk," Grizzly accepted the challenge. "Let's see you take some flour and load it, Frenchy."

"By gar, you get a beeger wagon," Frenchy boasted. As he stooped above the pile, Bellew noted with amazement that his long arms were encircling, not one, or two, but three of the hundred-pound sacks. He paused a moment, grunting a little as he straightened; then they were on his shoulders, and he strode out to the wagon as a little cheer went up.

Grizzly watched, still with that catlike smile, unmoving until Frenchy returned. Then he stooped in turn, setting each arm about two sacks. His face reddened a little with the effort, but he straightened with two hundred pounds on each shoulder, carried the load out and flung the sacks almost contemptuously into the wagon. French was staring, his jaw sagging a little.

The boss returned, saying nothing, merely looking at his challenger. Frenchy gulped.

"By gar, Greezly, you some man," he acknowledged, and tried the feat himself. He seized four sacks, balanced a moment, and strove to raise them. For a moment, as Bellew had done at first with the one sack, he almost succeeded. His face reddened, his eyes were fairly popping, but he

could not quite do it. The sacks fell in a heap.

FOR a moment longer, Frenchy stared down, a little ruefully. Then his face cleared, and he threw back his head to emit another burst of gargantuan laughter.

"By gar, Greezly," he exploded, "you a better man than I am. My girl, it looks like she not eat fresh eggs this trip, heh? And me, I not get drunk."

Totally undismayed by the turn of events, he went back to his work. Grizzly Brent watched him for a moment, sucking at the stubby pipe; then Bellew found Brent beside him, surveying him keenly.

"Lookin' for a job?" Grizzly inquired softly.

Bellew shook his head.

"Just looking around," he confessed. Then his admiration overcame his diffidence. "That was some feat you accomplished just now, Mr. Brent—lifting those four sacks. I wish I could do half as well."

Grizzly surveyed him for a moment. There seemed to be a peculiar gleam in his eyes, which puzzled Bellew.

"I need workers—need 'em bad," he said. "You've got the frame, even if you're soft. You could soon do as well as Frenchy, and I pay good wages."

"Thanks, but I expect to be moving on in a day or so," Bellew explained.

"If you change your mind, let me know." Grizzly moved away. Back in reality again, Bellew watched for a while longer, vaguely jealous of that same physical prowess which he had been scorning, then returned to the cheerless hotel room he had taken. And now he was thinking seriously.

Maybe he ought to take that job. It would be hard, gruelling work, and while one side of his nature shrank from the very thought of it, the other leaped to the challenge. It would make a man of him, as Grizzly Brent had inferred. More to the point, if he went north with this new jerk-line string, he'd be still farther away from the terror which dogged his steps by day and haunted his dreams with nightmares when he tried to sleep.

But he didn't need to resort to anything so drastic as that—not yet, at least. He pushed open the door of his room, paused suddenly, staring around at the disorder of it; then, suspicion flaming in his eyes, he crossed swiftly to the bed, drew out a bag from under it, and snapped it open.

With fumbling fingers he pawed hastily, almost desperately, through the contents—the shirts and ties and collars and other garments of a gentleman, which had all been arranged neatly before, but now were in a jumbled tangle. His face whitened.

Presently he stood up, breathing heavily. As he had been sure in that first instinctive moment, it was gone—his five thousand dollars. He was a stranger in a stranger land, a fugitive from justice, and broke.

CHAPTER II

Fugitive

ROBBED! Bellew's world whirled about his head, and he sank down on the bed, trying to think. If his world had crashed about his head a few weeks before, it was nothing to the chaos which this discovery brought now.

It didn't matter that he was Quentin Bellew, III, scion of an old and distinguished family. Nor that, to his account in Eastern banks, there was several times five thousand dollars, nor even that he had a few outrageously shocked and severely disapproving relatives who would still help him out with any amount of needed cash. For that was all conditioned by the fact that they would help if they could, that he would get the money if he could. And the colder, starker fact that he could not.

His mind went back to that sunny day nearly six weeks before, and only a hundred miles south and east of here, along the new line of steel which stretched from east to west, and which had finally linked a con-

tinent. And to himself, taking one of the first trains westward, seeing the country, fretting at the hardships of this new, de luxe travel.

He smiled grimly at the thought. Those cars were hard-seated enough, no doubt of that, the heating was sporadic, the ventilation nothing to brag about, the dining facilities mostly notable by their absence, the way one slept a matter of choice—either choice worse than the other.

You could either stay on the train when night came, and try to sleep in your seat, with the jerking and jolting and all the rest; or you could get off at some town and stay over twenty-four odd hours—odd, because the trains didn't run on a very exact schedule—meanwhile trying to rest up in such a room as this in some such an apology for a hotel. There really wasn't much choice, as Bellew had discovered. A few weeks ago, he had considered himself a real pioneer, undergoing some pretty severe hardships.

Now that seemed, in retrospect, like the lap of luxury. He had chosen to stop over a couple of days in Ridleyburg and see the frontier at its rawest. He smiled now at the thought. And in Ridleyburg he had killed a man.

Even yet, his recollection of that event was somewhat hazy. He had followed the custom of the country and taken a drink or so, and, strangely enough, the liquor in Ridleyburg had been much more potent than what he was accustomed to. After the first drink, things had become increasingly hazy. He had a dim recollection of an altercation, of a man lying sprawled on the floor in a spreading pool of blood. Not much else.

SINCE then he had gathered the essential facts. Justice moved swiftly in Ridleyburg, which was a new county seat and proud of it. There had been witnesses enough to testify that it had been cold-blooded murder, with him drawing a gun and shooting Jake Kilrain, in the heat of a quarrel. And that despite the fact that Kilrain was unarmed.

Bellew didn't know much about it. It was as though all this had happened to somebody else. For a long time he couldn't bring himself to believe that it had happened to him. Only the law said that it had. The law had gone farther than that, largely disregarding the noted legal light hastily imported from the east for his defense. Quentin Bellew the third had been sentenced to hang, and, shortly thereafter, his appeal had been brusquely rejected.

There had been those dark, incredible days behind bars, his still more incredible escape. It had been engineered, he was pretty sure, by Uncle Godfrey—Uncle Godfrey strongly disapproved of his nephew, and most especially of this whole unsavory episode. But even more, he would disapprove of a Bellew being hanged as a common felon.

And whatever you might say about Godfrey Bellew, he had a way of getting things done. But after that Quentin had been, for the first time in his life, strictly on his own.

He couldn't go home. The law still wanted him, wanted him more than ever now; he had to hide. He had tried going as far as San Francisco, hundreds of miles from Ridleyburg, hoping to lose himself out that way. And in San Francisco he had seen, luckily in time, Sheriff Felix Fletcher.

Fletcher was the law in Ridleyburg, as efficient and cold-blooded and ruthless as a weasel. With a reputation of always getting his man. He might, tradition said, suffer setbacks, but once he started after a man, he kept after him, be it days or years, until he got him. Only once in a career stretching over a decade had he failed, and that was because death had caught up with the fugitive first.

Bellew had seen Fletcher in a big saloon in San Francisco, far from his legal jurisdiction. He had known, instantly, that Fletcher had traced him to San Francisco, that he was there after him.

Small technicalities of law, such as prevailed back east, didn't amount to much out this way. Red tape of all sorts was for civilization, not for the people who were building a nation,

who had to get things done. Sheriff Fletcher might be outside his legal and technical jurisdiction, but if he showed his badge and told his story, he would have little trouble in making his arrest anywhere, and taking his man back to hang.

And Bellew had the uneasy conviction that, if he was taken back again, even Uncle Godfrey could not contrive a second release from Felix Fletcher's gallows.

He had gotten out of the saloon, out of California. And finally to Hell Roaring.

IT WAS comparatively close to Ridleyburg, yet as good a place in which to hide temporarily as he could think of. Or so it had seemed, up to a few minutes before. But now his money had been stolen.

That changed things. With money, you could do much. Without it—Bellew shivered a little. Unless he could get the money back—

Grimly, he went out the door and strode downstairs. The clerk in the little office looked up respectfully enough.

"Anything wrong, Mr. Stanway?" he asked. Bellew had signed the register, which was rather an innovation in Hell Roaring, as Tom Stanway.

"Wrong enough. Somebody's broken into my room and ransacked it while I was out."

"Eh?" The clerk heaved his two hundred odd pounds loose from the chair, leaning over the desk and blotting half of it away. "Busted in, you say? Take anything much?"

"My money."

"Very much?"

"Seven hundred dollars."

"Well, I'll be dog-goned." The clerk spat expertly at a spittoon halfway across the lobby, and watched it plop with apparent satisfaction. "All you had?"

"Just about."

"Dog-gone. That's too bad, now." He scratched a partially bald head. "Le'see, what time'd you go out today?"

"About three hours ago. Aren't you going to do anything about it?"

"Me? What can I do, Mister? Things like that happen every day in this town. One feller in town, kind of a sound sleeper, lost a gold tooth. Not that they happen very often in this here hotel, but you see that sign there. Not responsible for valuables left in rooms."

"I see it," Bellew agreed, trying to keep his voice calm. "But what the devil is a man to do? There's no place to put things, is there? No bank, or anything?"

"We-el, Grizzly Brent sort of takes charge of things, down in his express office. I'm right sorry about this, and we might tell the Marshal, Jack Colby. Though, with folks comin' and going all the time—" He shook his head.

Bellew clutched desperately at a last straw.

"Have you seen anybody in here, the last three hours, that didn't belong?"

"Well, that's an angle. Let's see. There was one feller kind of took my eye, he was so sort of unobtrusive. Hm. Not very big, with sandy hair under an old cap, a big nose and a big mustache. And sort of bright eyes."

Bellew stiffened.

"You say he was around, up and downstairs?"

"Yeah, reckon he was. Know him, mebby?"

"He was a stranger to you?"

"Gorry, yes." The clerk spat again. "So many strangers in this durn town, I don't scurcely know nobody any more."

"Did you notice anything else about this man? Did he have a scar on his right cheek—kind of whitish scar shaped like a V?"

"Come to think of it, I reckon he did. Yeah, he sure did. Want to report him to Jack Colby?"

"I—I guess not." Bellew looked around the room a little wildly, turned and stumbled out of the hotel, on to the street. If it had been disaster a little while before, it was worse than that now. For he had no slightest doubt as to who had robbed him—or why! He could get his money back by going after it, or just

hanging around here—but the spending of it would be a different thing.

For that description fitted too closely to belong to any other man except Sheriff Felix Fletcher.

CHAPTER III

To Make a Man Weep

BELLEW stumbled down the street, thankful now for the storm. He couldn't go back to the hotel or to his room. It had been sheer luck that Felix Fletcher hadn't been waiting there for him when he came in. For without doubt, the sheriff had traced him this far, with the uncanny ability and persistence of a bloodhound. Evidently he had never been very far behind, on this tortuous trail.

But Fletcher was a lone wolf. He had helped himself to the money, of course, with a two-fold purpose in mind. Even he couldn't hang around the hotel to watch quite all the time, and if Bellew evaded him for a while, having the money would help.

Without it, the sheriff figured, the fugitive, being a tenderfoot, couldn't go fast or far. And the natural thing would be for him to report its loss to the town marshal. If he did, Jack Colby would promptly arrest him and hold him for the sheriff.

The thought caused him to glance hastily around. Now there would be two lawmen in this town, looking for him. Like San Francisco, Hell Roaring had become too small for him. He had to get out. But where? How?

He had less than five dollars in his pocket, since he had been so stupid—he winced as he used the word, but repeated it grimly to himself—so stupid as to leave that money in his room. Five dollars was hardly enough to buy a couple of meals, in this town. He couldn't take the train—all trains would be watched now. Nor had he money to keep ahead of the sheriff by such means.

Bellew slowed down. It was nearly evening, and the early dusk, hastened by the steady downpour, was starting to settle. Yellow glows were springing up feebly here and there in windows; riders loomed ghostly along the streets. Down at the big warehouse, the long freighter string of jerk-line teams was getting ready to heave into slow motion.

They wouldn't go far, of course—a couple of miles out of town tonight, perhaps. But they were heading north, Bellew had learned—heading for Bang-Up.

Geographically, Bang-Up wasn't so far distant, in a straight line on the map. Only a few hundred miles, up in Montana Territory. But even here, in turbulent Hell Roaring, Bang-Up was a name spoken almost with awe.

For it was the last far outpost of civilization, the raw edge of the bulging frontier. Gold had been found in Virginia City, gold had been found in Bang-Up. Men flocked to both camps, coming in from Benton, and now and then from other directions. And the raw necessities of life were starkly needed there. They were worth almost their weight in gold, and would continue to be at least until the following spring. Such supplies as could be freighted would be needed badly for survival through that winter.

And so Grizzly Brent, whose freight wagons ran up from the railroad to Hell Roaring, and branched out from there to nearer and lesser camps, was starting a pioneer route to Bang-Up—starting it today. The first jerk-line string ever to try and traverse that route.

BANG-UP! If a man could lose himself anywhere on the frontier, that would be the place. Bellew had learned enough of the west to know that in such places no questions were asked as to a man's past.

More than that, it was about the last place where Felix Fletcher would expect him to go. For if he went at all, he would have to go with this freighter string. Knowing him, Fletcher wouldn't expect him to try anything quite that desperate.

Bellew smiled bitterly. In that case, he'd try it. He tramped down the street toward the warehouse, where the street was clogged now for

blocks with the long jerk-line teams, still standing patient, traces sagging. Eight or ten or twelve horses to a wagon. There were mule teams and ox-teams working out of here, but all these were horses. In the door of the warehouse, bulking huge and square against the dim glow of a lantern somewhere behind him, was Grizzly Brent.

"If I take a job, Mr. Brent, what's the chances of going with this freight string to Bang-Up?" Bellew asked, without preamble.

Grizzly surveyed him for a moment, the short black pipe protruding from his forest of whiskers, eyes bright and sharply quizzical. Then he removed the pipe between stubby forefingers and gnarled thumb.

"Can you handle horses?" he asked.

"I used to drive a team of matched bays," Bellew admitted.

"Never drove more than two at a time?"

"No."

"But you've got to get out of this town—eh, Bellew?"

Bellew started at the use of his name. Grizzly was smiling enigmatically.

"If you don't like that handle, I'll just call you Blaze," he said. "Since they're sort of buildin' a fire under you. I know about the sheriff—but he won't be figgerin' on you takin' this trip, I don't reckon. However, if you start for Bang-Up, it'll take a month or so, mebby more, to get there. And we don't carry no passengers. It'll mean working. Want to try it?"

Bellew gulped, and nodded.

"Not much choice, is there, Mr. Brent?"

"Not much, Blaze. And cut out the mister. I'm Grizzly. Climb up there on the seat with Frenchy and let him show you how to handle a jerk-line. Tomorrow you'll have to take this wagon, for Frenchy's only going as far as camp tonight. We got to have him here in town. All right, Blaze—let's see yore smoke!"

STILL a little dazed, Bellew found himself clambering up over the big wheel to a seat beside the huge Frenchy. He was still startled by the discovery that Grizzly knew who he was, and that he was wanted by the law.

Bellew found himself wondering. On the surface, Grizzly Brent was bluff and hearty, but Bellew had been considering, weighing him in his judgment for the last hour or so. Whatever else Bellew might be, he was a pretty good judge of men, and there was something about Grizzly which didn't strike him as being quite right.

"Not that it matters," he assured himself. "He's giving me a chance—about the only chance I've got. It's up to me to make good—even if I do have to work like the devil."

Frenchy surveyed him as he climbed aboard, nodding cheerily, rain cascading down his sodden hat brim and off his nose at the motion. To Bellew's surprise, he saw that Frenchy held only one stout leather rein in his hand, with the slack of this tied to a convenient iron bar. Now he reached out with his right foot to kick the brake loose.

"By gar, this weel be the deevail of a trip, yes," he confided. "And me, I want so mooch to go along. But Greezly, he say now I moost stay here and ron things in town." He shook his head. "You drive thees wagon, eh?"

"If you'll show me how," Bellew agreed. "I've never driven more than two horses at a time."

"Eet is easy, but yes," Frenchy nodded. "Thees line, it ron to the leader, who is smart, like you or me. Wan jerk, he goes to the right. Two jerks, to the left. Three means to stop. And four to get going. It take that moch to wake them up, when they stop." He grinned, jerked the line violently a few times, and loosed a stentorian roar to the entire team, which brought a lifting of drooping heads. The guide rein ran clear to the lead horse on the right, in front, Bellew saw.

Tugs tightened as the teams leaned forward into their collars, the wagon tongue jerked a little, and the big wagon itself groaned, quivered, and started to move—very slowly, the big,

wide-tired wheels sinking deep into the mud, but moving none the less.

"To drive ten horses in a jerk-line team, eet is easy," Frenchy confided. "Only the wan line to work, not four or six. W'en you hitch or unhitch, keep them all in the same places, and you 'ave no trobble—or not so ver' damn moch."

Bellew shifted his weight on the wet wagon seat.

"Sounds all right," he agreed. "But it's kind of exposed to the weather, isn't it?"

Frenchy grinned again.

"This is fine," he assured Bellew. "By gar, we 'ave a seat to set on, and all. Sometimes you perch out on an iron rod, like the cheeken, with your two feet on another. And on a long day, it is like to cut you in two."

THEY were moving, though little more than that, the yellow lights of Hell Roaring gradually dropping away behind them. Frenchy waved a hand largely.

"Eet will take weeks, maybe months, yes, to get to Bang-Up," he confided. "More than half the way, there is no road, no trail even. No bridges, and wan deevail of a country. Me, I 'ave been over it by mule, and even a mule, he have a hard time. Weeth all this—" He shrugged mournfully. "By gar, but eet will be wan hell of a trip. I weesh so moch to go."

"And Grizzly won't let you go, eh?"

The big French-Canadian shrugged.

"Greezly, he ees a big man, yes, but I do not stop for heem," he explained. "He goes along as boss of thees train, and he weel get it through, or kill every horse and man in trying. But he ees not the beeg boss. People just theenk he is. The beeg boss, he save my life once, when I am about to go squash in a log jam. Logs under me, logs on both sides, and two of them catch me in between, with another beeg one wheech aim to drop down on top. Not a pretty theeng, and he risk his neck to save me. And he get me out. And now he ees back east, with his wife sick. So for him I stay and look after things. For Greezly, no. But if he theenks he gives the orders, what the hell?"

Bellew was surprised. He had understood that it was Grizzly who owned all this big outfit, instead of being just a foreman, but Frenchy seemed to know what he was talking about.

"Who is the owner, then?"

"Beeg John Carravan, and he, I tell you, he is a man. But yes. Greezly, he try to buck him, to break heem. And who goes broke? Is eet Beeg John? *Non, non.* Eet is Greezly. But Beeg John, he does not hold a grudge. He puts Greezly in charge while he is away; he geeves Greezly the job of string boss for thees tough trip. I would have it, but he needs me in Hell Roaring. Is not that the thing to make a man weep?"

CHAPTER IV

Jimmy Carran

BIG JOHN CARRAVAN! That name was almost legendary across the frontier. A name to conjure with. But Big John Carravan, according to all reports, was a square-shooter, and the thought brought relief to Bellew. Somehow, his contacts with Grizzly Brent had convinced him that, whatever else he might be, Grizzly wasn't quite that. And there was relief in feeling that he was working for an honest man.

"Great notions you get," he told himself in the same breath. "Anybody would think that you still rated yourself as an honest man—instead of a killer one jump ahead of the law!"

Frenchy was still talking garrulously.

"Eet is wan good thing that a man as tough as Greezly handles this string," he said. "He weel get it through if anybody can, that I will say. But eet is a gamble, oh yes. And if it fails—it would not be then, maybe, just Greezly who is broke. But Beeg John, too. And that would make a man to cry."

The rain beat down with steady persistency. By now, Bellew was soaked to the skin, cold, acutely uncomfort-

able. A few weeks ago, in such a situation, he would have hurried off to get a hot bath, a hot drink and to crawl into a hot bed, all to stave off the possibility of pneumonia. The thought was a nostalgic one.

"Hope we have a good dry tent," he muttered.

Frenchy peered at him curiously.

"Tent?" he echoed. "By gar, there ees no tent on a jerk-line trip. You crawl onder the wagon, roll in your blankets, and feel lucky."

Bellew shivered, feeling sorry for himself. He was roused from that by French's resigned melancholy.

"By gar," he sighed, "I miss all the fon. Probably Indians try to scalp you, burn the wagons. All sorts of t'ings happen, and me, I have for to stay in Hell Roaring where nothing ever happens."

That, as regarded Hell Roaring, seemed to Bellew to be in the nature of an understatement, but he was thinking more of Frenchy's first remark.

"Is there danger from Indians, then?"

"Plenty," Frenchy nodded. "If you get through alive, I weel be ver' moch surprise, by gar. And me, I can't go along."

They were a mile out of town by now, mud rolling up on the wheels so that they looked three times their normal size, the straining horses barely moving. And this was level ground, a used, hard-packed road. Bellew wondered what it would be like when they were off the trails, crossing mountains and going down nameless valleys.

Ahead, a welcome beacon in the gloom, a bonfire blazed, and the wagons in the lead were already pulling off the road and to a stop. A cook was at work by the fire, cursing softly to himself amid the drip and hiss of the rain on fire and hot utensils, and the appetizing smell of bacon and coffee mingled on the air. Frenchy jerked his line, swinging the team, and drew to a stop.

"By gar, this is lucky," he sighed. "So many wagons, and a regular cook, as well as a horse wrangler. W'en you drive wan wagon alone, you do all that yourself."

NOW came the job of unhitching the ten-horse team, but it was a relatively simple one. They had merely to drop the harness to either side on the ground, fill nose bags with grain and adjust these in place.

"We go eat," Frenchy said. "W'en we finish, we take off the nose bags; then they run till morning. The wrangler, he breeng them in. I help you get them in place tomorrow, so you know your own teams."

Half numb with chill and the strangeness of things, Bellew started across toward the fire, then checked suddenly at sight of another driver who seemed to be having trouble with one of his horses. The horse was big, fractious; rearing when he tried to adjust the nose bag, plainly unused to any such thing. The driver was a small man, standing at least a head shorter than Bellew, looking blue with cold and almost frail, but fighting grimly to control the bronc.

Bellew was beside him in two quick strides, reaching up to hook an arm over that hammer head and force it down, catching the strap into the strap into the buckle all in one smooth operation. At least he had worked with horses enough in the past to know something about them.

"Ugly brute, isn't he?" he commented.

"Thanks," the other driver returned, a little breathlessly. "He'll learn, when he gets a taste of the oats."

"You driving a wagon?" Bellew asked curiously.

"Why, yes, I am. I—I've driven before."

"And here I've been feeling sorry for myself," Bellew confessed with a grin. "But I'm bigger than you are, and if you can handle a team, I ought to be able to manage, I guess."

"Oh, are you new to this sort of thing, too—on a jerk team, I mean?"

"I couldn't very well be any newer," Bellew conceded. "In fact, I'm pretty much of a tenderfoot, I guess." He found himself liking this other man, who seemed to be only a beardless youth, but had a competent air about him, for all that. "They call me Blaze," he added.

His companion extended a hand,

smaller, harder, but still nearly as well kept as Bellew's own.

"I'm glad to know you, Blaze. I'm Jimmy Carran."

The handclasp was firm and hearty. They came to the circle of firelight, and Bellew noted that Carran helped himself to a tin plate, knife and fork and spoon and tin cup, then proceeded to heap the plate with freshly baked biscuits from a big pan, with a stack of hot beans dipped from a kettle and several rashers of bacon, and to pour coffee, strong and black, from the pot into his cup. Bellew followed his example.

The coffee was certainly strong, and there was no sugar or cream. But as they withdrew a little from the others and sat on a wagon tongue within the heat of the fire, Bellew felt that he had never tasted a better meal. The rain was slackening, but everything was wet and muddy, with a cold, raw dampness which penetrated to the marrow of the bones.

Bellew stood up and stretched. In the dusk, he hadn't been able to see much of his companions on the long trek ahead. The meal had made a big difference, but he was tired. The nose bags still had to be removed from the horses; then he dug out the blankets which had been allotted to him and stored under the edge of the tarp. But when he looked under the wagon he stared in dismay at the mud and wet. Even after slogging through it for a couple of miles, it was still a lot worse than he had expected.

JIMMY CARRAN appeared, lugging an armful of something which he tossed down. Fir boughs.

"We can't always get these, but there are plenty right close around here," he explained. "I was cutting some for myself, so I got a few more for you. Look."

He crawled under the wagon and showed Bellew how to lay them, tips toward the middle, heavy end branches slanting outward.

"It makes a soft mattress, till you get used to sleeping on the ground," he explained. "And when it's all mud, it keeps you out of that, and dry."

"Thanks," Bellew gulped. "I was wondering how I was going to sleep at all tonight."

"You'll get used to it," Jimmy assured him cheerfully. "See you in the morning."

Bellew pulled off his boots and outer clothes, arranged them to dry a little if possible and crawled into the blankets.

It was not until he was dropping off to sleep that he remembered that the sheriff was in town, only a little more than a mile away, and that he had completely forgotten about him. Even that thought kept him awake only a minute longer.

Morning was a nightmare. He had slept scundly, and awoke dry and warm, but stiff and sore, with protesting muscles. The rain had stopped, though clouds still hung low, and it was not yet full daylight. Already the horse wrangler was bringing the horses in, and Frenchy appeared, cheerful as ever but grumbling on the side because he was going to miss this trip, and helped Bellew adjust nose bags and get his teams lined up where the harness had been dropped the night before.

Some of the horses had worked in pairs or in these long string teams before, and they knew where they belonged, walked to their places without trouble and waited patiently to be harnessed and hitched, munching oats contentedly. Most of the big draft horses who worked in these teams, long hours, day after day, were calm, with nothing of the skittishness of saddle cayuses.

But some of them did not know their places yet in this new set-up, and two or three were inclined to kick at the drop of a hat, which presented something of a problem. Frenchy walked boldly in, though with care, and Bellew noted that this treatment worked best.

"By gar, you have for to show them who's boss, that you not a beet afraid of them," Frenchy explained. "If they theenk you scared, you have one hell of a time."

Slinging the harness on, heavy and water-soaked as it was, was something else again. Bellew had driven horses, but he had never wrestled

with a harness. It was twice as clumsy and nearly as heavy as that sack of flour had been on the previous day. Without Frenchy to lend a helping hand, he doubted if he could have managed, and contemplated the days ahead with something of dismay.

But a glance, through the brightening dawn, to where Jimmy Carran was struggling with the heavy harness made him forget his own troubles. With Frenchy's help, he was soon through, so he walked across and lifted a harness for Jimmy, who grinned at him.

"You look all right, this morning," Jimmy greeted him. "Here, let me show you. Get hold of it this way, with it over your left arm, to lift, and your right hand to guide it. That's it. Now drop part over the rump of the horse, bring the rest ahead, and toss it over the collar. See, isn't that easier?"

"A lot better, all right," Bellew confessed. "I seem to be dumb enough."

"You'll learn. You may be soft, but you've got a head on your shoulders. Oh—"

The exclamation was uttered as a horse reared suddenly, jerking the harness partly out of Jimmy's hands. A hame caught on his coat and shirt, tearing it open, almost pulling the slighter figure under the plunging hoofs before he could jerk free. Bellew sprang to help, then stared in sudden blank amazement at what that opened shirt had revealed, and what Jimmy, with scarlet cheeks, was trying hastily to conceal again. Jimmy Carran was a girl.

CHAPTER V

Northward Slow

SHE gave a quick, almost desperate glance around, to discover whether anyone else had seen the mishap, and seemed relieved that no one else had been anywhere near. Her eyes were pleading, tragic, as she turned to Bellew.

"Blaze, you—you won't let anybody know?" she demanded, and for a moment her fingers were strong, compelling on his arm. "You—whatever else you may be, or whatever you're here for, you're a gentleman!"

Bellew felt his own cheeks turning red, but he nodded gravely.

"Sure, Jimmy," he said. "Whatever you say. And I hope I am!"

"Oh, you are—I know you are!" She gave him a quick, tremulous smile. "I—I'll explain, when I get a chance," she added breathlessly. "But no one else must guess. I've *got* to get to Bang-Up!"

Bellew's mind was in a whirl as he climbed to the seat of his wagon a little later, so much so that he accepted Frenchy's hand-crushing grip and farewell almost unthinkingly, then kicked loose the brake and gave his jerks on the line mechanically.

They were under way by full daylight, which was delayed nearly an hour by the lowering clouds. Ten wagons, each big, all heavily loaded with a miscellany of supplies. A fortune was being freighted northward in these wagons, providing it reached its destination in good shape.

Grizzly Brent himself drove the lead string, well up ahead. Behind him came the wiry little oldster with the tobacco-stained beard whom Bellew had first seen loading supplies in the warehouse at Hell Roaring. This was Pecos Smith, who had freighted all across the West, who possessed a large and colorful vocabulary, and who, if supplied with fine-cut, seemed immune to all other hardships.

Jules McCoy drove the third wagon—a big, hard man, who seemed to take pride in his hardness, saying little. Bellew was fourth in line, with Jimmy following him. He had yet to learn the names of his other fellow-travelers.

Since there was here, ordinarily, a hard-packed road, they all followed it in turn, each successive wagon cutting a deeper rut. It was better than the soft sod off at the sides would be—better for them. For others it would be something else again. At midmorning a six-horse stage came careening toward them, and was forced to pull out to one side and past, the driver expressing his opinions of them heatedly as he did so.

BELLEW had gathered that this was something in the nature of an epic freighter train. Usually from one to three jerk-line teams traveled, sometimes with two or three wagons in line being pulled. This time, because the summer was already swiftly waning and winter would prevent any other such trip being made, and because supplies were so desperately needed in Bang-Up for that winter, these ten string teams and the ten big wagons were making the trip, with twelve people going along in all. The extras included the cook and horse wrangler.

Progress was discouragingly slow. Bellew could have walked alongside and traveled a good deal faster, but he had to stick to his job, though there was almost nothing to do. His own lead horse knew its job, which in this case was merely to follow the wagon ahead. The clouds gradually broke, and the sun came out by midforenoon. Hell Roaring could still be seen behind them.

Bellew was getting limbered up again, but the day was a long stretch of monotony. It was not until evening that he had a chance to talk with Jimmy again, as they wandered off together in the darkness a little way. The moon was coming over the edge of the horizon, a thin sickle which gave little light, but he caught her half-smile as she looked up at him.

"I suppose you've been doing a lot of wondering about me, today, Blaze?" she said.

"Quite a bit," Bellew confessed. "And I suppose you've been doing the same, about me."

"No." She shook her head. "I think I was right when I said that you're a gentleman, Blaze. I suppose you're down on your luck—but it's certainly lucky for me that it was *you* who discovered my secret. Someone I can trust."

"Maybe you wouldn't think I was very trustworthy if you knew why I'm really here."

She looked up at him again.

"Do you want to tell me?"

"I might as well, so that you won't be under any false impressions, and since Grizzly knows, anyway. I'm making the trip to Bang-Up to get away from the law."

"Oh, is that all?" She gave a quick little laugh. "Half the people in this country are here for that reason. Which doesn't mean that they're necessarily so very bad."

"It's serious, in my case. I'm wanted, down in Ridleyburg, for murder."

"Murder?" He heard the little catch in her breath. "You? I don't believe it."

Bellew smiled wryly.

"You get used to the notion, after a while. At least I did, though it rather jarred me at first."

"That sounds as if you didn't believe it, either. Tell me about it."

Thus encouraged, he gave a brief account, mentioning no names. Jimmy listened in silence, then shook her head.

"Then you don't know whether you really killed anybody or not," she pointed out. "Maybe you did, but certainly, if you were drunk, you didn't do it purposely, or even knowingly."

"I'm afraid that's a pretty poor excuse," Bellew said ruefully. "The law certainly doesn't accept it."

"No, maybe not. Though, in many cases, in this country, it considers it as a perfectly valid excuse, even for murder. . . . And I still think my first estimate of you was right—and I'll keep on thinking so until you give me cause to think otherwise."

"In that case, I hope you'll never change your mind."

"I'm sure I won't, Blaze. I started to tell you why *I'm* here. I'm no tenderfoot. Maybe you've noticed that."

"You seem capable enough, all right."

"I ought to be, after living in this general country all my life. My story's stranger than yours, Blaze."

"I'm listening—and it can't be much stranger than mine."

"Oh, it isn't so incredible, I guess. Not in this country. I'm sort of an orphan. My mother's somewhere up around Bang-Up. I'm pretty sure of that, from things I've been able to piece together. Just where she is, or how—that's what I intend to find out."

TO HIS amazement, Bellew saw that her little fists were clenched, the nails fairly cutting into her palms, and her voice was low but shaking with feeling.

"I'm afraid she's in the power of some brute—I haven't seen her for months. I don't know where she is, now, but I—I'm afraid he's a squaw man—and treating her like one. Do you wonder that I've got to get up there—that I've got to find her, no matter how hard it is?"

Here, Bellew guessed, was something of stark tragedy, just behind the page which she had partially raised for him. He could begin to understand why she was so anxious to get there, but some of it was beyond his grasp.

"I can see that. But wasn't there any other way to get there? Couldn't you have gone as a passenger?"

"They don't take passengers on a trip like this. And it's the only way to do it. If they knew I was a woman—I couldn't go at all."

"And here I was feeling sorry for myself. You've got a lot more of what it takes than I have."

"We haven't got started, yet," she said. "Not really."

By the next day, Bellew had some inkling of what she meant. They followed what was still called a road, but the term was one of courtesy only. It was a trail which had been followed before by a few wagons, up hill and down, along slopes so sharp that sometimes it seemed as if the wagons would tip over sideways, and with a careless disregard for stones and other impediments. And every one of these jolts was transferred directly to the driver, with so little cushioning as to be ridiculous.

"Guess I didn't have no fair idea of what rough was, before," Bellew confessed wryly to himself.

It was a toughening process, and tough to take. When the reach of a wagon up ahead snapped under the strain, and the entire load of flour sacks had to be unloaded while repairs were made, then loaded back in again, Bellew found that every man of the train was expected to lend a hand.

His own job in the unloading was to get back in the wagon and bring the sacks to the rear of the box, where the end-gate had been removed, so that the others could get hold of them. At first it wasn't so difficult, since he could pull them off the pile and have them almost ready for the others.

But as the pile diminished in size and he had to half drag, half carry each sack nearly the length of the long wagon box, with never a pause for breath between, it became in the nature of a nightmare. His arms and shoulders ached, his back seemed strained, his legs threatened to buckle under him and let him down.

ONLY the sight of Jimmy Carran, taking her turn with the rest of them, slinging the sacks to her shoulder and carrying them a good fifty feet to the side, kept him going. Bellew gritted his teeth and managed to stand the gaff. Somewhere in the last couple of days, he had acquired enough stamina so that he made it, though he all but fell out of the wagon once it was empty.

For the next hour, those who were more expert were busy with the job of repairing, giving him some opportunity to rest, though he tried to make a show of being busy. But his muscles ached for a chance to relax, to stretch out somewhere and go to sleep.

There would be no sleep, however, until the wagon was reloaded again. Dusk was closing down by the time repairs were completed, but the sacks of flour had to go back in. And this time it fell to Bellew's lot to carry them from the pile to the wagon, in turn, along with the others.

The first one wasn't so bad. Somewhere, in the last two or three days, he had learned something of the knack, and had toughened his muscles so that, taking a sack from near the top of the pile, some five feet off the ground, he managed to heave it on to his shoulder, to walk to the wagon and toss it in the box, all with an appearance of ease.

Returning to the pile, he saw Jimmy Carran trudging sturdily along, a sack balanced on her shoulder, seem-

ing to find no undue difficulty in the task. Just behind her came Grizzly, with two sacks. Bellew gritted his teeth and hoisted another.

It was heavier—at least half as heavy again as the first one had been, if protesting muscles meant anything. They creaked and groaned as if in need of grease. And the third sack almost had him down before he had it up.

He reached the wagon with it, staggering, dumped it in, and started doggedly back. Whatever happened, he wasn't going to quit, here before all these others, especially while Jimmy took her regular turn without apparent trouble. If a girl could do this, he could.

But even the back trip, empty, was bad. His legs seemed to have lost their resiliency, his breath came harshly, sweat beaded him, though the air was chilly. And there was still a big pile of sacks left there. Only now, the top one had all been taken, and those that remained had to be lifted, swung, to get them on his back.

Back at the pile, Bellew grasped one doggedly and paused. He had to get it up at the first try, he knew, or he'd simply fall over on top of it. Then Jimmy was beside him, lifting, and the sack went up easily. Bellew flushed in the dusk, but his voice was husky.

"Thanks, Jimmy. I—I'm a pretty poor sort, I guess."

"You've got what it takes," she said, flashing him a smile. "And the cook needs some wood, I think."

"Yeah, one of you get him some," Grizzly Brent added, returning for two more sacks. "Me, I'm getting hungry."

Relief flowed through Bellew in a wave. He could make it with this sack, now that he had it up, and getting wood would save him from utter collapse. Then his jaw set.

"Jimmy can get the wood," he growled.

She flashed him a questioning look, then gave him a sudden understanding smile. New strength seemed to flow into him. He attacked the next sack savagely, had it up and kept going. His legs, his whole body was wooden now, and he moved mechanically, as though this were something which had been going on forever, which would continue to do so until eternity. And then, almost stupidly, he stared down at the empty ground, from which the last sack had vanished. Only then did his legs buckle under him, causing him to sink down suddenly on a convenient stone.

There, presently, Jimmy joined him, bringing two laden tin plates—one for him, one for herself. Her smile was luminous.

"I was right on both counts," she said. "You are a gentleman, Blaze—and you're a man, too."

CHAPTER VI

Hennessy's Place

THE MILES were falling behind them, so slowly that the long teams seemed scarcely to move, but with an unyielding steadiness which carried them relentlessly forward, for all of that. The weather was better now, clear and cool at night and warm by day, the road hard-packed, and the last town far behind them. Though here and there a ranch or outpost of sorts was still to be encountered.

"We'll reach Hennessy's place tomorrow," Grizzly announced. "Have to get a couple of horses from him. He always has a few. It's the last place where anybody lives till we get to Bang-Up."

They needed the horses, since one had sunk down in a hole in the road, breaking a leg, and another was so weak with distemper that it could scarcely keep going. The one horse had been shot, and the wrangler's cow pony forced to take its place in the harness.

The pony had done so ungraciously but with little choice. Among the big draft horses it could go along or hang back, but it would be taken relentlessly, none the less. Just the way that he was being taken these days, Bellew reflected.

Strangely enough, he found himself rather enjoying the experience. Sleeping in blankets on the ground, under the wagon, with a few boughs

when they could be had without too much trouble, was about as comfortable as sleeping in his own bed had been back home. The main difference was that in those days he had frequently been wakeful, and now he was asleep almost the moment he stretched out.

After the first few days, most of his aches and pains had vanished. He could eat a meal which would have astonished him a few weeks before, and still be hungry. It was no longer any trouble to catch up a hundred-pound sack, heave it to his shoulder, and walk off with it. The discovery of this fact elated him tremendously.

"Blaze, you're almost getting to be a man," he assured himself. "Not quite yet, but you're on the way. Now—I wonder?"

Looking around, he saw that no one was where they could see what he was doing. The early dusk cloaked the encampment, and he tossed the canvas tarp back, pulled out a couple of sacks from his own load, lifted one to his shoulder, then, with a little maneuvering, got the second sack to his other shoulder.

The double load made him grunt, but he turned and walked away more easily than he had done a few days before with only one sack. He made a circle, going a couple of hundred feet and back, and though his breath was coming short, his legs showed no undue inclination to buckle as he dumped the packs back in place.

Two hundred pounds! Pride surged in him—such pride as he had not experienced in long years. He was no such a man as Grizzly Brent, and for sheer, compact muscle, he knew that he never would be.

But his body was becoming lean and hard, the muscles rippled smoothly under his shirt. And he guessed that, though he had lost several pounds of near-fat, he was putting on weight despite it—weight which meant something.

HENNESSY had horses for sale when they reached his place—a combination store, livery stable, hotel and house, with a bar across one end of the main storeroom. His horses were big, young, and promising to look at.

"Got a couple, if that's what you want," Hennessy agreed, pulling at a walrus mustache. "One of them's broke. The other one, though, is just a cayuse yet. I've tried to break him, two-three times, but he's full of devil. Reckon you can put him in the middle of a string and take that out of him, though."

Grizzly nodded.

"Sure," he agreed. "We'll take him, come morning, and I'll put him in my own team."

But that would be another day. Since this was the last store of sorts that they would meet until Bang-Up, it was apparent that every man intended to make the most of the opportunity. Grizzly paid them a few dollars apiece in wages, which could be spent on clothes, food, or whiskey. Most of the money, it was apparent, would go for the latter.

"Me, I'm going tuh have supper here, for a change, then a drink or so tuh wash it down," Long Ike Tolman said solemnly, and the others seemed to agree with him. Bellew sat at a table with Ike, Van Kyle and Dude Chatterton. The Dude was probably the most unpopular member of the party, for, while he knew his business and did his work, it was apparent that he considered himself as being a cut or so above the common herd, and he did not hesitate to say or act the part.

"Beef," Van Kyle exclaimed, sliding into a chair and eying the juicy chunk on a platter in the middle of the table. "Dog-gone, that's the first roast beef I've seen in I don't know when. Makes my mouth water."

Bellew felt the same way. It was at that moment that Chatterton took the last vacant place, and, being closest to the platter, he reached urbanely for it, slid the entire chunk off onto his own plate, and started to attack it with knife and fork, serenely unconscious of the looks cast at him by his companions.

It was characteristic of the man, and Bellew felt his anger rising. But Ike Tolman merely reached for the

potatoes, and, seeing the innocent look on his face, Van Kyle said nothing.

"This here is what they call civilization," Ike commented. "But the way they run things here, I dunno but I'd druther go back tuh the chuck wagon. What do yuh think, Van?"

"That was shore pretty terrible, what we saw when we come in," Van Kyle agreed solemnly.

"Shore was. Now, we don't want tuh spoil yore supper, Chatterton—"

Chatterton laid down his knife and fork suspiciously.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Reckon I shoulda kept my big mouth shut," Ike sighed. "What a man don't know won't hurt him, usual—special if he's got a good strong stummick."

"What the blazes do you mean?" Chatterton insisted. "You've said too much to stop now."

"Why, seems like it ain't very sanitary, the way that cook wiped off yore plate with a dirty sock, 'stead of takin' it out for washin'," Ike explained solemnly. "Figgered we didn't see him do it, I guess—"

CHATTERTON'S face had turned slightly greenish. He looked at his plate for a moment, glared wildly around, and his wattles reddened. Abruptly he scraped back his chair and strode toward the kitchen. Grinning, Ike speared the beef, sliced it expertly into three portions, and passed it to Van Kyle and Bellew.

An altercation arose from the kitchen, angry voices trying to outbellow each other; then Chatterton reappeared rather hastily, with a red-faced cook close behind him, waving a meat cleaver menacingly.

"Sock," he snorted. "Yuh tryin' to insult me? If yuh don't like the food, don't come here!"

Chatterton slid hastily into his chair again, breathing hard. His eyes narrowed as he saw what had happened to his meat, but he said nothing, and the others ate in solemn silence. Grizzly stood up as the meal was finished.

"Better drink plenty, tuhnight," he adjured. "What yuh get here'll have tuh last you a long time. Only thing is, we quit drinkin' at ten and turn in. Got to be able to ride a wagon tomorrow."

Two hours didn't seem to Bellew like very much time for drinking, but he was soon to learn that he was uninitiated in the profounder mysteries of a debauch. In his own circle, there had nearly always been wines and liquors in the house, kept on the sideboard, ready to hand at any time. Men had drunk more or less, to enjoy the taste of the liquor. Anything else had been frowned upon.

Here it was different. Big Jules McCoy, driver of one of the wagons, whose father had been an Irishman and whose mother was French-Canadian, set the pace for the evening. He poured a tin cup brimming with whiskey from a quart jug, closed his eyes tightly, and gulped it down as though he were taking medicine, then swore and shook his head.

"Hennessy," he said, "that stuff's strong enough tuh eat through an iron kettle."

"Shore," Hennessy agreed. "It's liquid dynamite, poison and hell-fire, with a dash o' brimstone tossed in."

"That ain't the half o' it," McCoy grunted, and poured another mug full. "Tastes worsen' rotten eggs."

"What do you drink it for, then?" Bellew asked curiously.

McCoy shook his head, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and blinked in surprise.

"What do you s'pose?" he demanded. "I drink it to get drunk, sure. Wouldn't touch the stuff for anything less'n that."

Ike Tolman winked at Bellew.

"They don't like it," he sighed. "It's a plumb waste o' whiskey with these fellers. Just like pourin' it down a rat-hole. Me, I like the stuff, but I know my limitations. I got tuh ride that wagon tomorrow. Have some?"

Bellew laughed and shook his head.

"Nope. I got to ride tomorrow, too, and I know my limitations."

But the liquid fire was already having an effect. McCoy, from being ordinarily watchful and quiet, was be-

coming quarrelsome. He stood and barred Bellew's way as he started to turn.

"Have some, like Ike said," he ordered. "Yuh ain't no better'n the rest of us."

BELLEW stiffened. He was willing to take a drink, if that would be all there was to it, but if he once started, he was apt to find himself as drunk as any of them, on that stuff. And that wouldn't do. There had to be somebody who would be sober and clear-headed tonight—on account of Jimmy.

"The stuff goes to my head, Jules," he said. "I can't hold it like you can."

"Who cares a damn whether you can hold it or not?" McCoy growled. "Take a drink, I said."

He filled a cup and thrust it at him. Bellew saw red. His fist lashed up, spilling the contents and sending the cup flying.

For a moment he stood, apprehensive fists clenched, breathing heavily. McCoy was mad, and he was drunk enough now to be dangerous. Instead of launching himself at Bellew, he glared for a moment; then one hand swept back to the table, closed on the neck of an unopened quart bottle, and he swung it suddenly, murderously.

Instinctively, Bellew ducked, came up under it, and struck with all the force of his body behind the blow, made doubly strong by the shock of terror. He caught McCoy on the chin, hurling him back for a half a dozen feet and down.

It was a blow which would have left most men cold, but with McCoy it seemed merely to enrage him. He came to his feet like a cat, snarling. But now, unexpectedly, it was Grizzly who lumbered forward.

"That's enough, McCoy," he ordered. "Blaze is right. We've got tuh ride tomorrow. And looks like we was gettin' too much, already. That'll be plenty."

"Not till I bash his head in, it won't," McCoy threatened hoarsely.

"There ain't going to be no fightin'," Grizzly insisted. "We've got tuh ride tomorrow."

"Get out o' my way, Grizzly, damn yuh," McCoy roared. "I—"

He had backed to a corner, one hand darting out to close on a double-bitted axe which stood there. But before he could jump, a gun appeared in Grizzly's hand.

"I said no fightin' tonight," he roared. "Drop that axe! And go hit the hay! Hennessy, your whiskey's too strong."

McCoy glared for a moment, his eyes red. Then slowly he set the axe back in place, shrugging.

"One of these times, Grizzly, we settle this thing, you and me," he promised.

Grizzly shrugged.

"When it don't interfere with the trip," he agreed.

CHAPTER VII

Sign in Red

SOMEWHAT to his surprise, Bellew found that he had acquired stature among the others by the events of the night. His refusal to drink, and his feat in knocking McCoy down, in daring to do it, were accepted highly. Jimmy viewed him with shining eyes when she heard about it.

"That was one time when you proved yourself a man," she said. "It was a big thing to do, Blaze."

Bellew laughed uncomfortably.

"Big, nothing," he protested. "I was scared stiff. I didn't dare drink, for fear of getting drunk and what might happen then—"

"That's just it," she insisted. "If they had all been drunk—you don't know a crowd like that. They just go crazy. You showed your judgment that time, and they all know it."

Somewhat to his surprise, McCoy, the next day, seemed to hold no rancor toward him. But with Grizzly it was a different matter. McCoy had promised the boss a settlement, one of these days, and it was easy to see that neither of them was forgetting that.

On the surface, however, every-

thing was tranquil, and Long Ike Tolman grinned at Bellew as they were harnessing up.

"Dog-gone," he said, "but my head feels right nat'ral this morning. I sorta hated to have the party busted up so quick, last night, and so'd the rest of the boys, but we feel better today, for a fact."

The new cayuse, which had been purchased from Hennessy, was to start in Grizzly's team today. A big, high-strung bay, he resented the harness. He hated still more being hitched in place, but he had little choice. Left to his own devices for a few moments, he kicked, jumped, and caused considerable trouble. Grizzly's jaw tightened.

"We'll fix you up, feller," he said grimly. "Blaze, bring that chain."

The chain in question was a heavy log chain. Holding the horse again, they straightened him around, since he had kicked free of his traces, and Grizzly fastened the chain around his neck, then ran the slack up ahead, fastening it so that it would pull evenly on the four horses up front.

"Hold him a minute," he ordered, and climbed to his seat. As they unloosed him, the other horses swung into their methodical motion, all nine of them going stolidly forward, as if there had been no rebel in the line.

It was not long until the outlaw found that he was trapped. He could try to jump and rear and kick, but the heavy chain held him pretty well in place. There wasn't much that he could do while the others kept moving steadily ahead, and, discovering this, he sullenly threw himself down in the road and lay there, sulking.

Now the real purpose of the chain became manifest. The other horses plodded ahead as though nothing had happened, dragging the bay, a dead weight, by the chain about his neck.

For a few minutes he lay there, sulkily enduring, half choked and utterly miserable. Then, discovering that no attention was paid to him, he scrambled to his feet, leaning into the collar and pulling with the others, anything now to keep that chain from tightening again. Grizzly smiled thinly.

"He's had enough," he said. "He won't give no more trouble."

THAT, as it proved, was true. And it was emblematic of the whole trip, Bellew reflected. A man or a horse had to pull his own load here. It was no place for the soft, and to the weak there was no mercy shown. And with that thought he again found himself wondering as to what had been Grizzly's real motive in wanting to hire him for this trip, in the first place.

Grizzly had known who he was, known that the law wanted him. And known, too, that he was tenderfoot, not toughened to this sort of thing. The reason that Grizzly had given—that he needed men, that they were hard to get—that, viewed in the light of growing experience, just wasn't so.

More and more, he was convinced that there was nothing altruistic about Grizzly Brent.

Jimmy was a constant surprise to him, as he came to know her better. She held up her end of the work like a man, and to such good purpose that none of the others had guessed that she was anything but what she claimed to be. As the trip went on, Bellew could see the increasing need for keeping them in that belief.

With all that, Jimmy was very woman-like. He, of them all, glimpsed at times the underlying sweetness of her, the thoughtfulness, as on that first evening when she had brought him an armful of evergreen boughs. None of the others would have thought of doing that for anyone else. Here you stood on your own feet, or you fell.

Grizzly's intervention, in his incipient quarrel with Jules McCoy, had been because he wanted no one hurt, while there was work to be done.

And there was plenty of work. The fine weather had ended again, and more rain kept leaking from leaden skies. The roads, such as there were, had turned to something resembling a morass again. Creeks, usually low at this season of the year, were creeping steadily toward the high-water mark as the rains continued. And de-

spite the rain and the chill of advancing autumn, there were insects—flies and mosquitoes, the latter seeming to thrive on the wet weather, and to delight in feasting on them.

For sheer savagery in attack, Bellew had never seen such insects before. As the nights grew more chill, with frost feathering the land at every clear dawn, the insects shortened their attacks to part of the day and early evening, but still they appeared. Tempers grew short, nerves raw. And Bang-Up seemed, with wet weather and increasing delays, to grow farther and farther away.

"BE WINTER, 'fore we get there, all right, at this rate," Long Ike commented, and cut a careful chew from a plug of tobacco with a huge clasp-knife. "Providin' we make it a'tall. Why, golding it," he added indignantly, "we figgered six weeks, tuh start with. But at the rate we're travelin', we ain't scurcely holdin' our own."

"Winter ought to help," Bellew said thoughtfully. "If it would freeze up, so we could get out of this eternal mud, we could go a lot easier." He glanced at the wheels, several times their usual diameter with mud, which now and again grew so heavy that they were forced to stop the wagons, take sticks and laboriously dig it away before they could move at all.

"Yeah, we could move easier without it—if that was all there was to it," Ike conceded. "Though it takes cold weather tuh freeze the ground solid enough to carry loads like we got. And settin' up there in weather like that—well, yuh can set up there and freeze like a man, or run alongside like a dog. Trouble is, even a dog gets cold."

He loosed a brown flood toward an unsuspecting deer fly on a bush nearby, and went on.

"And if this everlastin' rain should turn to snow, it can be worse'n mud—strange as that may sound. Tuh say nothin' of the difficulties of tryin' tuh cross a creek on the ice, and then havin' that bust when yuh're halfway across."

It wasn't a pretty picture, as painted, or as they were living it now. Bellew found in the situation something challenging, to which he found his spirit responding. But there was need for such a lift.

For the toil became more arduous for man and beast alike. All pretense at roads had been left behind. This might have been wilderness where no white man had set foot since time began. It wasn't quite that, for Grizzly knew the country in general, as did some of the others, but it was a sketchy knowledge, and their being there before had left no imprint—though the wagons were leaving their mark, in ruts which would scar the land for years.

TO CROSS the hills, now, was more than any one team, even of ten or twelve horses, could do. So it was necessary to take two jerk-line teams and put them together on one wagon, taking it to the top of a hill or divide, then returning for the second wagon. This caused almost incredible delay, and it had just one advantage. It always fell to Bellew's lot to make these extra trips with Jimmy Carran, and the two of them could thus spend whole days together on the wagon seat.

But it presented added problems as well. More than once, he had found real difficulty in getting ten horses and the big wagon around some necessary turn or curve in the trail. Twenty horses doubled the length, and made the passage of turns even more hazardous.

Grizzly went ahead, having the most difficult and hazardous job of all—to find a trail which could be followed, not only to the top of a hill, but down again on the far side. Halfway up a mountain there was generally no turning nor turning back. It was go on across, or meet disaster.

But passable trails were not easy to find, and each wagon had to follow closely in the tracks of the one ahead, each one cutting deeper. If there was a bad hole, it was more than probable that it could not be dodged by succeeding wagon, but had to be gone through at whatever the cost.

"Whew!" Bellew exclaimed, once an overturned wagon had been reloaded again. "Looks to me like that would be expensive stuff, once it reaches Bang-Up!"

McCoy regarded him strangely for a moment.

"Yuh're plumb right there, Blaze," he agreed. "Grizzly'll charge 'em plenty—but when yuh ain't got no choice, you pay—or starve."

And now, for the first time in several days, they met a man on horseback, traveling with a thin turkey tied behind his saddle and a rifle ready in saddle-sheath. He had long, reddish hair and wore a beaver cap, and was, plainly enough, a trapper. He regarded the freighter string in amazement.

"Headin' for Bang-Up, yuh say?" he repeated, and pulled at an ear. "Dog-bite me, but yuh've got some trip ahead of yuh."

"Worse than what we've come over?" Long Ike demanded.

THE TRAPPER turned almost a pitying glance toward him.

"Yuh ain't got started, yit," he pronounced. "I was just figgerin' that I was gettin' out of the hills, so tuh speak."

"Where you heading for?" Grizzly demanded.

"Civilization, if so be as there is ary such thing." He smiled craftily. "I found a little gold, my own self, up in that country. But I ain't stayin'. Not any."

"Why not?" Grizzly challenged.

"Mister, I know when I've got plenty. I've fit Injuns in this country more'n one winter, but they was kind of sporadic-like in the way they did it, then. They'd lift yore hair sort of absent-minded like, just in line of duty. But not as a business. This year, they're all set tuh make a business of it. And me, I'm kind of fond of my own pelt, yet a spell." He caressed his long, shaggy thatch and grinned.

"You figure they'll bother the settlements?" Bellew asked.

"Pardner, I'm figgerin' that they won't bother Hell Roaring none—nor me, if I'm there. Which I'm shore aimin' tuh be, and have a time of forgettin' all this."

He waved his hand inclusively at the rugged landscape, declined an invitation to spend the night with them, and went on, though it was near sundown, on a day which had turned clear again. Almost at once the wagons halted, and later, Bellew could see a thin line of smoke a mile or so on their back-track.

For some reason which he did not understand, Bellew was restless. He rolled in his blankets under the wagon, but did not fall asleep. Finally, impatiently, he got up, pulled on his boots, and drifted out of the silent camp. Almost without conscious choice he headed back down the road. He had no purpose in mind, though he admitted to himself that he would enjoy talking to the trapper, if he was there, and still awake.

The moon was up, now, on one of their rare clear nights, and the night was very still. A small mound of dead ashes indicated where the cooking fire had been, and nearby was a darker something. Bellew came closer, undecided whether to disturb the sleeping man or not. Suddenly he stared, with narrowing, horrified eyes, and moved closer, as though drawn by a magnet which both repelled and urged.

For a moment he looked down in shivering silence, then expelled his breath in a little sigh. The trapper was lying there, huddled grotesquely, but not as a man who sleeps, save in that last and final sleep. But it was not that which was so shocking, nor even the deep, raw wound in the back of his head, where some heavy instrument had hit him. It was more than that—something so horrible that Bellew stared, unbelieving and appalled.

The thatch of long reddish hair, the pelt of which the trapper had declared himself to be so proud, was gone.

CHAPTER VIII

Quicksand

BELLEW stared a moment longer, feeling suddenly sick; then, as the full meaning of the thing became clear to him, he

glanced around quickly, his hand dropping to his gun-butt.

He had seen this man only once in his life, and that briefly, had spoken to him only once. Now he was in this shape—and though Bellew had looked on death before, never had he seen it in such grisly guise as this.

If some roving redskin, or band of them, had found the trapper, who was an old Indian fighter, had taken him so completely by surprise, then they could not be far off. Bellew looked around again, his apprehension increasing.

He could do the trapper no good by lingering. His duty was to reach the train and warn them—warn Jimmy! There might be no danger for a dozen of them, but on the other hand, a dozen sleeping men, spread widely apart, each under a wagon, offered easy prey for lurking savages.

A few minutes before, he had been mindful of the clear, bright beauty of the night.

Back in Quincy, Bellew had made a custom of being out late at night, but never before had he noticed the stars or anything else in nature with much attention or enthusiasm; tonight it had been different. This was his land—the land and the challenge which, all unwittingly, something in him had sought and hungered for during a quarter-century, and which, by sheer accident, he had found!

Or so it had seemed then. Now the brush, the lurking shadows might be figures of menace, the owl hoot a signal from a bird who carried a tomahawk. Something seemed to move, and he had no way of knowing whether it was imagination or grim reality. But he had to pass that point.

ALERT, tense, but not half so frightened as he had imagined that he would be, Bellew approached it, saw that there was nothing else but a small rabbit shivering with dread of the owl, and went on. The wagons, dull shadows which crouched against the ground, were ahead now. He reached Grizzly's, at the head, and spoke hurriedly.

Grizzly reared up, rolled out from beneath his wagon, and stared. Bellew explained, while Grizzly listened, his little eyes sharp and questioning.

"Indians, you say?" he repeated. "The trapper scalped? What you givin' me?"

"The truth," Bellew retorted bluntly. "Are you interested or not?"

Grizzly stared a moment longer, nodded.

"If what you say is true, guess I'd better be," he nodded. "We'll take a look."

"How about warning the others? Suppose an attack should be made while they sleep?"

Grizzly shook his head.

"Couldn't be moren't one or two rovin' redskins," he said. "Not off here. And they wouldn't risk attackin' a train like this. But you can keep a lookout, while I go back and have a look. Yuh can yell if anything shows. But not otherwise. The boys need their sleep."

Bellew nodded. Grizzly was taking it pretty much as a matter of course, and he was aiming to go back, alone, for a look. But then, he knew Indians. Though, for that matter, Bellew reflected, the trapper had claimed to know them, too. And now—

Already, Grizzly was vanishing down the trail. In a surprisingly short time he was back, his face a little grim.

"You sure saw it right, that time," he agreed. "But you better not say anything about it. I'll keep watch tonight, while you get some sleep, and startin' tomorrow night we'll sort of change things, with somebody on watch—just in case. Though I figure it was just some passin' brave that found a good chance to get a piece of hair. No need to scare everybody by tellin' 'em about what happened."

"How about burying him?" Bellew asked.

Grizzly shrugged.

"I rolled some stones over him, to keep the wolves away," he said shorly. "Ain't nothing more we can do for him."

His callous indifference was a little shocking, but it was logical enough. There was nothing they could do for him. And Grizzly had seen enough

of that sort of thing in the past to take this attitude. It was the only sort you could take, if you were going to live in this country.

HE WAS a little bewildered at Grizzly's order not to tell the others. This crew had started out, knowing that there was apt to be danger of that sort ahead. The knowledge shouldn't scare them, but it would put them more on the lookout for trouble. Well, Grizzly was the boss, and he would have to tell them about it by the time they made camp another night.

Apparently, Grizzly had kept his promise to keep watch, for it was he, before even the wrangler was astir, who rode off and returned with the horses, so that they were off to an ealry start again. There was frost in the air that morning, but, insofar as the camp itself was concerned, nothing untoward had occurred during the night.

"Be ice along the creeks and ponds pretty soon," Long Ike remarked. "And next time it starts to storm, we'll be lucky if it don't turn to snow."

It was mid-forenoon when they reached another creek, a fair-sized stream which looked shallow and easy to cross. What was more to the point, there was a good road down to the water and an easy ascent on the far side. But after the horse wrangler had ridden up and splashed ahead, he turned suddenly and came back, the horse making a prodigious effort of it.

"Quicksand!" he said.

Grizzly swore.

"It would be that way, the first decent place we've found to cross," he said. He looked at the water worriedly. "Creek's up pretty much, at that, for the time of year."

For a minute he studied it moodily, then swung on the cow pony himself and set out on a tour of inspection, heading upstream. An hour later he returned, heading downstream without a pause. Ike shook his head.

"Looks like there wasn't any good crossing," he said.

It was another hour before Grizzly was back, with the pony blowing hard. He stared at the gentle-flowing creek, tested it briefly for himself, and came back again. To get the heavy, slow-moving wagons across in that deadly stuff looked to be out of the question.

"But it's that or nothing," Grizzly growled. "Ain't another crossing either way, for miles, that ain't the same, and no way to get to it if there was."

He issued orders, unhooking his own team, and two others as well. Two of the strings were sent splashing through the water, the horses sinking and floundering, but, urged by voice and fear alike, getting across. As the second team was ready to move, they were hooked to the front of the third team. Grizzly turned to Bellew.

"Soon as they get across, we'll hook on to my team," he said. "And this team'll be in front of yores, Blaze. We'll see can we get your wagon across."

MOVING in such fashion, the first two teams were across, the third one in the river, when the pull came. Bellew kept his seat. There wasn't much for him to do—the teams ahead would keep going if it was possible, pulling his own team through and then the wagon. If it was too much of a pull—

Three teams were out, now, on dry land, laying into their collars, Grizzly and the others urging them ahead. The big wagon sank down, lurching, hesitated, but the wheels kept moving, bringing up mud which washed away as they turned; then it was finally across.

"Two teams'll take a wagon, now," Grizzly nodded. "We're pounding a bottom into it."

It was night before every wagon was across, uneventfully enough. But that which lay ahead, where Grizzly had ridden on for a look, promised to be worse.

"This was pie," he said. "Tomorrow we've got to ford a river—and it's flooded. The horses'll have to swim for it."

His smile was a little grim.

"No sleep tonight," he added. "We've got to cut trees and fasten them on both sides of the wagons, to help float 'em across. Ruin our loads, otherwise. And we can't spare a day for foolin' around."

His prediction concerning the lack of sleep was not an exaggeration. There were big trees not far away—tall, wide cottonwoods—and some of these, though still standing, were dead. They were dry and light, excellent material for floating the wagons. They were chopped or sawed, the limbs knocked off, then roped, two big trees on each side of every wagon.

Bellew's hands had been hard, calloused. But by morning he knew that he'd never been so close to complete exhaustion, with his hands red welts. The others were in little better shape, but the wagons were ready. A hasty breakfast, and they got under way again. It was a gray day overhead. Then, as they finally came in sight of the river, Bellew instinctively gripped the seat. For that high, turgid flood which rolled grayly to the distant sea stretched nearly a quarter of a mile wide, and all that had gone before looked like only a mild introduction to that which waited.

"I'll take it first," Grizzly nodded. "The rest of you keep comin'—with your horses headed upstream. And once you start—keep fighting ahead. If you ever get lost out there, there ain't nothing short of hell can help you."

CHAPTER IX

Deep River

NOTHING short of hell! Those chill words seemed to express the philosophy of Grizzly, and with the rolling river and the gray north ahead of them, they held a sinister sound.

It was mid-forenoon by now, though it had the appearance of delayed daybreak. The horses lifted uneasy heads, snorting, as they approached the water. The river's crest arose a little, like an angry mane; drift rolled and bobbed; the waters were gray and troubled. Somewhere, along its watershed, there had been a deluge not long before.

Viewing it all, Bellew realized soberly that this was the greatest test they had faced yet. But Grizzly was right. They had no choice but to go ahead.

A mounting excitement rioted in his veins. It wasn't fear of the river, nor exactly of himself. Rather, he was curious to know how he would conduct himself if things didn't go right. Heretofore he hadn't been allowed to find out things for himself. His meat had been well cooked, and the broth of it spoon-fed to him. Now it was raw meat, and a man could eat or choke.

The lead horses slowed, setting reluctant hoofs in the edge of the flood, but Grizzly's roar urged them on, and a long whip lashed out impellingly across their backs. The wagon lurched along behind, seeming to hesitate, then jerk forward, wheels dipping, coming up with a swirl of mud dripping from the rim and washed across the spokes. Then the spokes had vanished, the rims were like thin knives cutting the water, but it rolled on—and on.

Bellew had little time now for watching the others. During the shifting of the last couple of days, his wagon had come up to second place in the train, and Jimmy Carran followed him in turn. As his own horses, more matter-of-fact than the first team with a wagon ahead of them, splashed out, Bellew turned to wave at Jimmy, caught her gesture in reply, like a flag waved in the breeze, and something tightened in his throat at sight of the half bantering smile on her face—a smile which seemed like a cloak drawn across terror in her eyes.

Just how grim a thing this river was, Bellew hadn't quite guessed in advance. His own horses were following steadily, sinking deeper with every step. The boiling swirl of muddy water from Grizzly's wagon wheels had vanished, and all at once, as though jerked by a giant hand in the depths, the whole wagon slewed vio-

lently around, downstream. It was floating then, with the teams, noses pointing upstream, swimming in a crooked line ahead.

The whole thing was somehow grotesque and shocking, but at that moment one of his own leaders floundered, went completely out of sight, and came up swimming. He jerked on the line, but the horse behind fell into that hole as well, and something like terror was communicating itself to the others. Then his leaders were swimming, he jerked frantically again to turn their heads upstream, and disaster reared from the depths.

IT WAS that hidden pocket into which two of the horses had fallen that had done it. Now the teams were bending downward in the middle, in danger of being jackknifed by the push of the current. Then, as the wagon was afloat, it jerked viciously downward, adding its pull to their troubles. But by that time the leaders had gotten straightened out.

For a moment it seemed about to check them, even to pull them back. The logs were serving their intended purpose, but they made the already heavy loads more unwieldy in the grip of the current. Bellew saw that, despite his jerks on the rein, the leaders were gradually swinging downstream.

There was nothing that he could do about it; nothing that the horses could do either. This load was too heavy for them, under such conditions.

Up ahead, Grizzly's wagon was still going on the course he had picked. Then, swimming strongly with heads pointed upstream as well, Bellew saw Jimmy Carran's outfit, making it in good shape. She would make it too, he guessed, but probably by landing half a mile farther downstream than the others.

The deepest water seemed to be on this side. Grizzly's team had found footing again, though it was still a long way to the shore. Jimmy shouldn't have much farther to go until she would be safe—

And then, watching her, Bellew sensed what it was that he had been afraid of all along. Something was wrong. One of her horses had become tangled in the harness, probably through panic. It was trying now to turn downstream, to climb upon the back of its mate, thrashing wildly, throwing the whole team into confusion. The wagon was rocking crazily, tipping a little, while disaster seemed to be pushing from beneath.

In that moment, Jimmy's coolheadedness showed itself. She was trying the only thing which might help, but it was something at which nearly any driver in the train would have hesitated, even on solid ground. She had tied the jerk-line, then clambered down from the seat, intent on reaching the point of trouble and getting the horses straightened out again.

To get up there she had to pick her way, walking on the submerged wagon tongue; then, past that precarious but passable bridge, here were only the backs of the swimming, plunging horses. The rebel was struggling more wildly than before, but Jimmy's voice came, cool and steady, calming them with something of her own indomitable courage.

BELLEW had seen bareback acts in a circus, but they looked simple compared to what Jimmy was doing now. But she had reached her objective. Clinging to a hame with one hand, she spoke sharply, then lashed out with the whip in her other and, catching the panicky cayuse across the nose, driving it around again, straightening it out. She groped in the water for the jerk-line, pulled it, and in that moment, as the whole team started ahead again, she lost her balance and toppled into the river.

Bellew's leaders had regained their footing now, and his own wagon was jolting as the wheels took to rolling again, but he scarcely noticed the transition. For a moment he watched, horror-struck, as Jimmy was tossed pitilessly in the swirl; then the truth dawned on him. She couldn't swim a stroke!

More than that, she had missed her desperate clutch to reach the teams

again, and was hopelessly below them now, caught in the grip of the current. Shedding his coat, Bellew jumped.

There was just one thing in his favor. Jimmy's team had kept heading upstream, whereas his own had swung down, and she was nearly directly above him now, though a considerable distance away. But at the speed of the current, she would soon reach him, if he could hold his own against it.

The waters hit him with an icy shock, and as he arose, gasping, Bellew knew a moment of wonder that the horses could make headway against the relentless power of it. Something bobbed on the current, and then he had Jimmy by the arm. A glimpse of her white face frightened him; she was limp in his grasp, half drowned and senseless. And the shore was a long way off.

There was no chance of help from anyone else. He had Jimmy's head across his shoulder, out of water, and this was one thing that he knew, and knew well. But swimming in such a stream as this was vastly different from a heated pool at home.

It was impossible to make headway against the pull of the current, and hold onto Jimmy as well. The only thing was to go with the river, gradually working his way in. And here was a fresh handicap which he had not counted on.

Up above, the deeper water had been close to the near shore. Here, though they were closer to the far one, it was still too deep to get any footing, as an off-shore current swirled him relentlessly out and away again. The limpness of Jimmy was frightening.

And the cold was like an icy hand, numbing limbs and mind alike.

Bellew swam fiercely. It wouldn't do to quit now—not with Jimmy in his arms. For himself, and this was a new thought which surprised him, things didn't matter much. But it was different with Jimmy. Jimmy had to get to Bang-Up, to find her mother.

THEY were closer to the shore now, though here the current was deep and swift. A bobbing piece of driftwood rolled in front of him, and Bellew threw an arm across it, resting for a moment. It was part of a tree, long enough to support their weight. Then he saw, with growing dismay, that the current was sweeping them relentlessly toward midchannel again, toward that mane like an angry cayuse's.

Half a mile farther on down they went around a bend of the river and out of sight of the wagons, now a mile above. Here the water was swifter, more terrible in its pull. Bellew had almost ceased to struggle, to think. He still clung to the log, supporting Jimmy, but it was largely mechanical. The shores, darkly wooded now, seemed to rush past them; he had largely ceased to feel. . .

It was Jimmy's voice which roused him, her hand on his arm, tugging imperiously.

"Blaze! Blaze! Wake up, Blaze!"

Dazedly, Bellew lifted his heavy head and stared around. The strong vitality in Jimmy had asserted itself, even under these desperate circumstances, and with her head held safely out of water she had regained consciousness as he was losing it. They were still drifting, the current was still fierce and angry, but once again it had swept them in shorewards.

Not enough for safety. It was still too deep to wade, too swift for swimming. He tried to swim again, but the leaden cold was creeping up his legs and clamping on his arms, twisting deep into his body itself, closing like ice around his heart.

Then he saw, roused a little by Jimmy's shout, where the unseasonably high water had gouged the bank, tearing loose a tree which had stood against the suns and storms of half a century. It lay out in the stream now, some of its roots still clinging to its ancient heritage, buffeted, but still strong.

Bellew saw it with a thrill of hope, thrashed wildly, flung up an arm and grabbed. Jimmy was doing the same. The force of the current, flinging him against it, nearly knocked the breath from Bellew, but the jar helped set his blood to coursing

again. They clung fast, looking at each other; then slowly, grimly, they worked their way to the top of it, and crawled along the bouncing, boisterous length of it to the shore.

The river had been cold, but the air cut like a knife. And they were miles below where the wagons had crossed. How many, Bellew had not the faintest idea.

CHAPTER X

Pardner

THE elation which had been his as they won to shore vanished almost as quickly as it had come. They were out of the water, but without fire they would freeze, and he had no matches. It would be impossible to keep going, in soaked clothes, as close to exhaustion as they were, for those tortuous miles back up to the freighter train. And just as surely, Bellew knew that they could look for no help from the others.

Jimmy's lips were blue with cold, her teeth chattering, but she was fumbling doggedly with a pocket of her coat. Seeing the gesture but not understanding it, Bellew turned to help her. To his surprise, the pocket was pinned shut with a safety-pin, and when he had fumblingly unloosed that, Jimmy pulled out a small metal container with a snug-fitting cover.

"Matches!" she said jerkily.

Bellew felt a fresh surge of hope. A pile of driftwood, a dozen feet wide and a third as thick, was piled six feet high almost beside where they stood, proof that there had been higher water sometime in the past. The wood on top was still moist from the rains, but digging at the bottom of the pile disclosed tinder-dry sticks, and he was fumbling with a match when Jimmy stopped him.

"Don't waste them," she cautioned, and went to a pine tree not far away. The lower branches were dead, some with the long needles still intact and dry. She pulled off some of them, thrust them at Bellew, and he stuffed them into the pile of drift and scratched a match. A moment later the fire was crackling.

Within minutes it had grown to a proportion which drove them back from the heat, which set their sodden clothes to steaming and started to drive some of the devastating chill from their bones. Jimmy, her face red again from the heat, smiled at him.

"Looks like we're still able to keep going," she said.

"Thanks to you, pardner," Bellew agreed.

She flushed a little, warmly, at the word.

"It's thanks to you that I'm here at all," she reminded him.

"That wasn't anything," Bellew protested. "I'd never have had the nerve to try what you did, if I hadn't been able to swim."

"There wasn't much choice," she reminded him. "Anyway, you certainly can swim."

"What was the idea of having your pocket pinned shut?" Bellew asked, changing the subject hastily.

"That was just in case anything should happen," Jimmy explained. "I carry the matches for an emergency. But I knew that if I did get in the river, and got out alive, it would still pick my pockets, unless they were pinned shut."

"Pick your pockets? How?"

"A swift current always does," she explained patiently. "Did you have anything in yours?"

"Why, I guess I did." To his amazement, Bellew found them totally empty now. "Nothing of importance, though."

AN HOUR later, dry and warm again, they started back upriver. The afternoon was waning when they came in sight of the crossing again.

The wagons were drawn up about a mile from the shore now, strung out as usual. Bellew's eyes narrowed as he looked at them.

"There seems to be one missing," he exclaimed.

Jimmy pointed to something out in mid-stream, nearly a mile below the crossing and not far from them. The remains of the missing wagon, piled up grotesquely.

"I wonder whose it was!" Jimmy breathed.

"Not yours—nor mine," Bellew said soberly. "I can see both of them."

Long Ike caught sight of them first, and advanced, swearing in the profundity of his surprise and relief. The others were close behind them.

"Where the blazes did you desertin', no-good imitations of jerk-line drivers come from?" Ike demanded affectionately. "We figgered yuh'd lit a shuck out of here and wasn't comin' back tuh lend a hand, just when the work was startin' in."

The others were boisterous and profane in their surprise and relief, having long since given them up for dead. The tale of the wrecked wagon added a grimmer touch.

"Anyway," said Grizzly, "you two getting back helps a lot. Tomorrow we roll again."

Tonight, Bellew was too tired to know or care whether any watch was being set or not. He ate, crawled into his blankets and was instantly asleep.

The way led upward the next day. It was not till late in the day that Bellew discovered what had been plain enough to the others from the start—that they were climbing to the top of a big divide.

The going here was remarkably easy, for crossing a mountain range, and that was what had fooled Bellew. The slopes were long and gradual, with only one or two sharp pulls. Not until they were getting well up into the mountains did the hills show up for what they were.

"One good thing, it's easy climbing," Bellew said. "That helps a lot."

"Yeah," Jules McCoy grunted. "Guess yuh're right there. But what'll it be like going down the other side?"

"If it's like this, it won't be bad."

McCoy actually grinned at him.

"Blaze," he said, "for a tenderfoot, yuh're a source of constant amazement tuh me. Sometimes I wonder are yuh just playin' the part, and again I figger there couldn't be such a plain blasted fool."

BELLEW stared after him, puzzled. Ike Tolman grinned at his expression.

"If yuh get a good slope on one side of a divide, yuh can always figger that yuh'll make up for it on the other," he said sagely. "This side here is like breakin' bad news easy. But when it busts, it's worse'n discoverin' that yuh've been pickin' poison ivy for posies—and then givin' them tuh yore gal tuh hide her blushin' face in."

They camped halfway toward the crest. Bellew awoke to a sharp bite in the air, with frost like a white blanket spreading everywhere at this level. It was mid-forenoon before the sun brought much warmth. And at noon they topped the divide.

This was the first real mountain pass that Bellew had ever seen. The others which they had crossed, or which he had gone over on the railroad, had been different. This was bigger, more personal. And at the beginning he was disappointed in it.

The top, instead of being the edge of things, was merely a level expanse reaching ahead for nearly a mile, partially wooded but largely open. Somehow it didn't look right, for the crest of a divide. He had expected sharp, pointed peaks, and there were none hereabouts. Just a level plateau.

But an hour later, as they approached the edge of it, he changed his mind. Here was what Ike Tolman had been talking about, the bad news at the top.

Once the flat stretch ended, the other slope of the divide appeared abruptly, falling away sharply to valleys far down below, showing blue and distant. And if they had enjoyed a long, easy slope to come up, it was anything else but that to go down. Bellew felt a little dizzy. If they could get down those hills and not meet disaster, they would be going some.

Apparently the same thought was in Grizzly's mind as he surveyed it.

"Might as well try it now as later," he grunted. "I'll sleep easier if we're down, tonight. Keep your hats on, now!"

It appeared to be six or eight miles to the bottom, the way they would

have to go, winding around, picking a precarious trail down. Grizzly went first, with Ike Tolman second, then, since the river had again altered their positions, Jimmy's wagon was third in line and Bellew next behind her.

The horses seemed to sense what was ahead as clearly as did the drivers. They went carefully, setting back in the traces, bracing against the push of the heavy wagons. Even then, with the brakes creaking and groaning protest, it was hard to hold them back at some points.

Grizzly seemed to have an uncanny sense for picking a passable road where none existed. His was a grave responsibility, for if he once led them into a spot where they couldn't keep going down, it would be all but impossible to turn and get out of there again.

A deep canyon was at one side, and the wheels were only a few feet from it as they inched cautiously past. Small stones rattled and bounced, dropping into the depths. The tops of tall pines lifted down there, looking deceptively feathery and soft. Rose bushes, leaves scarlet and gold, clung along the edges; service-berry brush, stunted here but brave against the hazards, held their position. Clumps of aspen made brilliant yellow patches against the blue of distant hillsides. A buffalo-berry bush showed silver.

In the blue above, a big hawk soared on lazy wings and rasped a hunting call from its throat. Down below, Jimmy's team was disappearing into a growth of pine and spruce. Grizzly's leaders were just emerging from it, out onto a long, steep slope.

BELLEW had reached that slope as well, with the greater part of the descent accomplished, before trouble struck. Here it had looked as if all that remained would be clear sailing. It was still steep, on down to the bottom and the valley, where a creek made a twisting silver ribbon in the sun. But it was straight going, for at least three quarters of a mile.

Grizzly had made the swing at the canyon, and Ike's string was nearing it, as Bellew came out from the timber and started the long descent. Jimmy was just ahead of him.

The horses were setting back in the harness, picking each step carefully, but the push of the wagon on this steep slope was terrific. Bellew could feel it, as he eased the brake on and off a trifle with his foot, since the wooden brake shoes, rubbing the iron tires of the big rear wheels, were already smoking from the long descent.

Now it seemed as if the accumulated push of the whole slope was making itself felt, and just ahead was the steepest part of all—a place where the wagons could not possibly have pulled up, heading the other way. But the two who were ahead had made it down, and Jimmy was there now.

And she was making it all right, Bellew noted admiringly, and driving as coolly as any man in the train. At that moment, with a report like a gun, something snapped.

Behind, Bellew saw that it was—the steel brake rod on Jimmy's wagon had broken under the strain.

Almost at once the effect began to show. Jimmy's team had been holding back hard. Now they, too, seemed to understand what had happened, and tried desperately to hold the wagon. But this was the hardest part of the long hill, and the heavy wagon was pushing against them like a giant hand. From barely moving, they were suddenly walking fast, faster—In a moment more they would be shoved into a trot, and then—

Bellew knew what it would be then. Once at a trot, the push of those tons on wheels would hurtle into a headlong gallop to keep from being crushed by the juggernaut behind. As long as the slope unrolled straight, they might manage to keep ahead of disaster. But when the turn near the bottom was reached, with that canyon waiting, they would be swept relentlessly on, into the black maw of it, horses and wagon and driver piling up in wild disaster.

There was just one chance—a slender one, but still a chance. With a yell, Bellew kicked off his own brake and urged his horses to a headlong

run. Jimmy, hearing his yell, looked back and understood what he aimed to try to do.

Her own face had gone white, but she strove to steady her team, to keep them holding back a little longer. Already, however, as Bellew's wagon rumbled alongside, coming now with the horses almost at a gallop, her horses too were giving way to terror and the relentless push, breaking into a run.

And he had to get ahead, if he was to do anything—which meant more speed than ever!

CHAPTER XI

Downhill Pull

BELLEW had a hunch that he knew the answer to that one, too. The odds were ten to one that it couldn't be done, and getting longer by the second. There was a terrifying quality, an almost irresistible force to such a load as that, running wild on a downhill pull. Even the grip of the river had not been such a terrifying thing as this.

Yet somehow they had crossed the river, and, save for the wagon, without much loss. This was just one more river to cross.

He was alongside Jimmy's wagon now, guiding his lead horse by frantic tugs on the jerk-line, swerving the team suddenly in as they gained a little, then straightening them out again. This was ticklish business, with ten horses in each team, all of them becoming swiftly mad with fear. It wouldn't take much to send them leaping against each other, rearing, kicking—in which case disaster would roll over them like a wave.

But Jimmy was watching, too, fighting with him. She jerked her own line, swung her team with his, and now Bellew's wagon was ahead, and he jerked again, turning his team the other way, kicking the brake on again as he did so.

The resultant jar as it took hold, even partially, sent a scream from the wood, smoke puffed up, and the heavy wagon slewed. But it slowed a little, and he pulled frantically on the line, signalling his leader to stop this wild run and settle back into the traces.

It spoke volumes for the training of the leader that he obeyed. But even that was only a part of it. To bring the other horses to obey was the big part of it. Bellew was aiding him, keeping his voice steady, calming them. The next instant the front wheel and corner of Jimmy's careening wagon crashed against the rear of his own.

That was what he had been working for from the start, and somehow, though he couldn't quite figure out how, he had accomplished it. He had his wagon in position to act as a brake for Jimmy's. But now came the real test.

Already, in those few mad moments of galloping speed, they had covered more than half the distance down the slope. Jimmy's brake had snapped under the strain of trying to hold her load, on that pitch behind. Bellew had taken that pitch without any brake, and here it wasn't so steep. But would his brake hold under the double strain?

It didn't look as if it could, not for long. He was shoving with all his weight now, holding it clamped down. The wooden shoes were whining and smoking and the rod was holding. But they were still going at a run. His own team was trying to stop, to settle back into the traces as the leader fought to obey the signals, and part of the thundering pressure behind them eased. But to slow under such conditions wasn't easy, and something else had happened—a jarring, snapping crash as the two wagons struck. Bellew hadn't had time to look to see what had happened.

JIMMY CARRAN'S team was still trying to run away. Her voice alone couldn't steady them, though her own leader still obeyed the jerk-line and kept them running straight, alongside Bellew's team. One quick glance back and his breath came a little shorter, as he saw what the crash had done.

The other wagon, running without a brake, had slammed against the rear

of his own, and ridden forward three or four feet under the impetus of its drive. The front wheel had splintered into a dozen pieces, and unless the wagons kept their same positions until they came to a stop, Jimmy's would collapse and roll, once this was out from under—and the canyon was just ahead.

But now they were slowing to a trot, then almost to a walk. The brake was still sending up smoke, but it had stood the strain. Both teams were holding back again, Jimmy's calmed by the others which traveled beside them. Bellew jerked the line for the swing, lifting his arm in signal to Jimmy. He held his breath as the wagons creaked and groaned, lined out again, and finally came safely to the bottom and stopped. Horses and men alike were trembling and shivering in reaction.

Bellew swiped a sleeve across his face and climbed down. He caught Jimmy as she all but fell over the wheel, and set her on her feet. Grizzly was coming back from his own wagon, a strange expression in his eyes.

"You two do have the damnedest luck," he said. "I'd of swore you couldn't do that, Blaze—you or any man alive. And anybody who knew better would never have had the nerve to try it. But you did it."

He looked at the smashed wheel and swore.

"But how're we going to keep going?" he demanded. "If it was a hind wheel, now, we could drag along on a pole. But a front wheel—"

"Better camp here two or three days, rest and fix things up," Bellew suggested. "That'll give me time to go back to the river. I think I can get a wheel and brake-rod off that wagon."

"That's an idea," Grizzly agreed. "You and Ike take a couple of extra horses and start now. You can reach there by night, and ought to be back here by tomorrow night. That'll only lose us a day."

It wasn't quite the arrangement which Bellew had hoped for, but he couldn't say so. He had wanted Jimmy to go back with him—but it would be easier for her, staying here. There wouldn't be much to do till they returned, and she needed the rest.

MOUNTED on one horse, with Ike Tolman riding beside him, and leading two others for pack horses, Bellew tried to analyze his feelings. Just why did he want Jimmy Carran along, anyway? He had started to assure himself that it was merely because he'd know then that she was all right, without anything to worry about while he was gone. But he stopped in the middle of that thought, startled. That was only a little of it.

The real truth was that he spent most of his time thinking about her, wanting to be with her, to talk to her. Certainly, while she was a mighty nice girl, Jimmy was no beauty, to attract him in that way. Going around dressed as a man, acting like one. And yet he kept thinking of her. He couldn't be falling in love, of course. That was preposterous. He didn't even know her name. And he was Quentin Bellew—

"Eh?" He turned, suddenly aware that Long Ike was regarding him strangely. "Did you say something, Ike?"

"Well, now, I been a-wonderin'," Ike conceded. "Here I've been talkin' tuh yuh for going on ten minutes, but it's just come over me that meby I was just lettin' my mouth run. Anyway, that's been about the net result, far as I could tell."

Bellew flushed a little.

"I'm sorry, Ike. I—I guess I was absent-minded."

"Guess you was thinkin' about that ride down this hill." Ike eyed him admiringly. "Yuh know, Blaze, for a tenderfoot, yuh're sure some hand for getting things done. Yuh take chances that any of the rest of us, bein' old hands and knowin' better, wouldn't think of. And danged if yuh don't get away with them. Some folks are just born lucky. I've seen it before. And while their string runs, they can play it high, wide an' handsome. Looks like yuh're that way these days."

"Lucky?" Bellew repeated. It was a new idea to him. "Lucky? Here I've

been thinking my luck was about as bad as it could be. But maybe you're right, at that.

"If yuh wasn't lucky, you'd have been dead twice in the last two-three days—and so'd Jimmy Carran. That boy sure thinks yuh're just about perfect, Blaze. And, considerin', I can't blame him none. The way he looks at yuh, he's got a real case of hero-worship."

Bellew flushed again. Up to a few weeks ago, life had been a comparatively simple thing, running on well-ordered principles. Of late it had taken on an entirely new pattern, and he seemed to have less and less to say about it. Nor did he understand much about it, either.

"What I was tryin' to ask you, though," Ike went on, "is, are yuh as much of a tenderfoot as yuh made out at first—or was that just an act put on for somebody's benefit?"

Bellew stared.

"DOG-GONE it, Ike," he protested, "I am a tenderfoot—I'll admit that. But how in blazes does everybody know it, just by looking at me? I wear the same sort of clothes as everybody else in this country, and I don't act so much different, do I?"

"We-el, yuh wear the same clothes—now," Ike conceded. "When I first saw yuh, back as we was pullin' out of Hell Roaring, yore outfit was so gosh-danged new and flarin' I put yuh down, right off, for a tenderfoot. But I've been wonderin' since if yuh wasn't playin' a part."

There it was again, despite his denial. And Ike seemed to be in earnest.

"No. I was one, all right—still am, I guess. These clothes don't look so new now, do they?" He glanced down a bit ruefully at the faded, muddy garments which looked—accurately enough—as if they had been slept in for a week. They were a far cry from the immaculate clothes it had been his custom to sport in the old days.

"No, they fit yuh, now," Ike agreed. "And all I got to say is, if yuh was a tenderfoot, yuh're learnin'—fast."

They reached the river again by dark, and camped. And in the light of their campfire, before they rolled in their blankets, Bellew made up his mind, and turned to Ike. Somehow, he had gotten a lot better acquainted with Long Ike Tolman in these last few hours than during all the days on the trail, and he liked him.

"What do you think about Indians, Ike? Any danger?"

Ike blinked.

"Might be," he agreed. "Gettin' intuh their country, all right. And there was a lot of rumors 'fore we left town. But Grizzly ain't said anything."

"I know he hasn't. Remember that redheaded trapper we met, a few days ago?"

"Sure. What about him?"

"I couldn't sleep, that night, after he left. So, having seen his smoke, I got up and walked down there to have a talk with him. I found him—dead. Scalped."

Ike straightened with a jerk.

"What's that?" he gasped. "Scalped? Why'n tunket didn't yuh say somethin' about it?"

"I did. I told Grizzly. He said not to scare the rest of you by saying anything, that he'd tell you. And he promised that we'd take precautions at night. We haven't done it."

"I'll be damned." Ike chewed on his tobacco thoughtfully. "Me, I can't make Grizzly out—but I'll keep watch till midnight, then call yuh. And tomorrow we tell the others. Me, I've come tuh have sort of a fondness for my scalp, even if there ain't much hair sproutin' there any more."

BELLEW agreed with him. His own watch, through the silent hours, was none too pleasant, but it was uneventful. By now, the myriad noises of the wilderness had acquired some meaning to his ears, and his nerves, jumpy when he had first heard such sounds, were steadier now. The wild hoot of a screech owl, even the distant, mournful wail of a wolf, left him unmoved. The thumping of a rabbit didn't sound like advancing Indians, and the ripple of the nearby river was almost too soothing. As Ike

had said, he wasn't so much of a tenderfoot as at the start of the trip.

Morning brought an unpleasant job. They had to strip partially, wade and swim to the half-submerged wagon, and there take off a couple of wheels get the brake-rod loose, and all of them back to the shore. A couple of hours hard work, however, saw it done, and then, having warmed themselves again, they tied a wheel to each pack horse, Ike showing his skill here, and started back. The journey, with the load, was necessarily slower, and it was late afternoon before they topped the divide again.

"This here's a change, anyway," Long Ike commented. "Sort of rests one for what's ahead."

"How much farther is it, anyway?"

"Blamed if I know. Looks like we ought tuh have made half of it, mebby a little better'n that. Though I'd sort of figured that we'd be pickin' a little different route, the last few days. Likely Grizzly'll swing, now we're across the river and over the divide."

Bellew looked at him sharply.

"What do you mean, Ike?"

"Me? Nothing. Only I figured we'd head a little more east, 'stead of swingin' so far west."

Bellew digested this in silence, as they rode downhill. Ike was canny, and he wasn't saying anything, but evidently he felt, as did Bellew, that there was something here which was beginning to smell. Well, they would tell the others about the trapper who had lost his hair, and see what Grizzly had to say to that.

Dusk was settling already, for the days had been shortening fast of late. Winter was just around the corner, if the signs meant anything. And by this time they should have been nearly to Bang-Up.

Ahead, a welcome beacon in the night, a campfire glowed, and the dark hulks of the wagons showed like sleeping monsters. The tired horses quickened their pace a little. End of the day—

A sudden scream cut the night—a woman's scream. Jimmy Carran, running desperately, broke into the circle of firelight, with the lumbering, incredibly fast-moving Grizzly close behind her. He caught her in his arms as the others began to appear as if out of a kicked-into ant hill, staring in amazement. Grizzly's laugh boomed.

"Look what I've got here," he roared. "She's sure been playin' us for suckers—but Jimmy's a woman!"

CHAPTER XII

Squaw Man

JIMMY'S hand slapped like a gun against Grizzly's whiskered cheek, leaving a mark which showed first white, then an angry red. With a quick twist she wrenched away and stood back, breathing heavily, eyes flaming. Viewed so, she was beautiful, and every eye was upon her.

"Don't touch me again!" she warned.

Grizzly's glance flamed for a moment; then he laughed with something of admiration in his tone.

"Little wildcat, ain't you?" he said. "Well, I like 'em that way—and I'll have to hand it to you, travelin' with us all this time and foolin' us the way you done. You got plenty o' spunk."

"I've got to get to Bang-Up," Jimmy retorted. Her voice was still defiant, but as she glanced quickly around, there was something like panic in her eyes. "I've held my end up as good as any of you, haven't I? Well, isn't that enough?"

"Plenty, and then some," Grizzly agreed. "We don't require for a woman—a white woman—to work that way. If we'd known—"

"If you'd known, I couldn't have come at all."

"Reckon that's so," Grizzly agreed. He eyed her curiously. "What the blazes do you want to get to Bang-Up for, anyway? That's no place for a woman."

"I—" Jimmy hesitated, glancing around again. Her eyes met Bellew's, and lighted at sight of him, and there was something in her look which caused his fists to double at his sides. "I—I'm looking for my mother. I've heard that she was up that way."

"Your mother, eh?" Grizzly's eyes

seemed to film for a moment, like a hawk's, and he studied her narrowly. "You sure started out on a tough trip. But the way it is, we can't send you back, now. No, we sure can't do that."

"I wouldn't go back," Jimmy said quietly.

"We wouldn't want you to." There was something unpleasant in the way Grizzly laughed, his eyes never leaving her face. Jimmy flushed, and Bellew felt the hot blood mount to his own face, angrily. He stared at the ring of intent faces revealed by the fire-glow, and went suddenly cold at what he saw there—they were like wolves, closing in for the kill. Only on the faces of Ike Tolman and Pecos Smith did he fail to see that look.

Jimmy had told him, back at the start of this trip, that no woman could make this trip—not if it was known that she was a woman. He hadn't quite believed her. Here in the West, supposedly, men—all men, he had understood—treated any woman as a lady, if she deserved to be so treated.

Another look around the circle showed him what she had meant. These were rough men, far removed from civilization and all its restraints. He could see the sick fear in Jimmy's eyes, and he shouldered abruptly forward.

"Any grub left for Ike and me?" he demanded. "We've had a hard day of it—but we brought back two wheels and a brake-rod."

GRIZZLY looked up, a little startled, noticing him for the first time. For the moment, at least, the diversion was created which Bellew had intended.

"Two wheels and the rod, eh?" he asked, and turned to look at them as they were unloaded from the pack horses. "That's good work. Gives us a spare wheel—and the chances are that we'll need it. You and Ike get your grub. You've done good work. The rest of you get busy, fixin' up that wagon, so we can be ready to roll in the morning. It'll be full moon in a few minutes, and give us plenty o' light."

The others obeyed, but there was a difference now which had not been present before. Jimmy hesitated, then filled a plate and brought it to Bellew, who was washing his hands. Her eyes smiled at him, thanking him for the interruption, but there was fear, a haunting terror in the back of them, which she could not quite hide.

"Have a good trip, Blaze?" she asked casually.

"Pretty good," Bellew agreed. "Good enough that we got back when we did. Eh, Ike?"

Long Ike's eyes were sober.

"That's about the way of it, Blaze," he nodded. "You stay here with us, Jimmy," he added.

"And don't worry," Bellew said grimly.

"And that's whatever," Ike nodded. "Now what the devil is Grizzly up to?"

Grizzly had set the others at work on the wagon, then had disappeared in the dusk toward his own wagon, some distance up ahead. Bellew had seen at once that the wagons were still in the order of travel, with no effort made to have them in a circle at night, and apparently no precautions were being taken to insure against a possible surprise by Indians while they slept.

Now Grizzly had dug something from his supplies, and was busy working with it. The full moon, as he had predicted, was rolling over the rim of the mountains, making things amply light to see by, and in its glow they watched him thoughtfully. Suddenly Bellew knew what it was that Grizzly was setting up—a tent.

Jimmy Carran was staring at it as well, her face wistful in the half-light, but otherwise cool and expressionless again. Ike watched for a moment, then went on eating without comment.

"This cawffee," he said, "is sure strong enough tuh swim a dead horse in. But one thing, yuh don't have tuh drink much of it tuh get a lot."

BY the time they had finished, the wagon was in shape again, with a new wheel and brake-rod, and Grizzly had finished with the tent, which shone white in the moonglow.

He rejoined the group as the others returned to the fire, squatting about it on their heels.

"I've been thinkin' it over," he said without preamble. "Jimmy turnin' out to be a woman makes a difference. We can't go on the way we been doing. You all know that."

Jimmy's face paled a little, but she stood near Bellew, and said nothing. Nor did the others, while they waited. Bellew still felt cold inside, with a sense of impending trouble, but he was curiously excited as well. A few weeks earlier he would have leaped to his feet and demanded to know why it should make any difference. Now he waited, still as the others, unmoving. Everything in its proper time and place.

"I've set up a tent," Grizzly went on. "It's for Jimmy—since it's not fittin' for a woman to sleep outside, the way the weather's getting. For Jimmy—and me."

"Do you think I'd share a tent with you, Grizzly Brent?" Jimmy demanded with swift passion. "I'd sooner die first!"

"Reckon you ain't going to have to choose," Grizzly said shortly. "I'm boss here, and I'm doing the choosing. Only way we can run things without a lot of trouble in a camp like this is for you to be my woman —and since I'm boss, that's right and proper."

There was a certain logic in what he said. Bellew recognized that, and so, he felt, did the others. Grizzly was taking cognizance of the situation as it was in this setting, not as it might have been down at Ridleyburg. But what was more important was that Grizzly aimed to work things out to suit himself, though again, from the standpoint of boss of the train, that was logical enough.

But he was forgetting that there were two sides to a question, even in this country. That he might expect to be challenged in this decision had probably occurred to him, but he shrugged that lightly aside, as of little consequence. Now Jimmy's voice flamed at him.

"I've heard before that you were a squaw man, Grizzly—but I'll not be one of your squaws!"

Grizzly laughed.

"You won't be treated like a squaw," he said. "It's funny, now I stop to look at you, that I didn't see that you were a girl, a long time ago. You're sure pretty."

"I tell you that I won't be your squaw, Grizzly," Jimmy repeated. "Don't make any mistake about that."

"And I'm tellin' you that you haven't any choice, or anything to say about it," Grizzly returned in perfect good humor. "You started on this trip knowin' how things were. You'd ought to have sense enough to see that this way it'll work out better for all concerned. I won't have everybody fightin' each other for you—and this way'll be better for you, too."

ANGER flared in Bellew at Grizzly's cold summing up of the situation, as though Jimmy had been a horse or cow—such burning, searing rage as he had never felt before, a passion which rather shocked him by its sudden, wild intensity. He started to rise to his feet, felt Long Ike's hand on his wrist, heard Ike's whisper in his ear.

"Take it easy, Blaze. I'm with yuh. But let the others do the scrappin' among themselves—first!"

Bellew controlled himself with a quick glance around. Ike, he saw, was right. Here were primitive men and primitive passions, all very near the surface now. Now, smiling a little, confident as a crouching puma and with the same unpleasant light in his eyes, Jules McCoy, who had challenged Grizzly's leadership once before, came to his feet.

"Grizzly," he said. "Seems like you're takin' a lot on yourself, the way you're figgerin' on decidin' this here."

Grizzly turned to front him, a little warily. Jules McCoy was nearly as big as Grizzly himself, a formidable antagonist under any circumstances, though, facing him, it was easy to see that the boss was supremely confident. The moon was high enough now to give plenty of light.

"I'm boss here," Grizzly snapped.

"Of the train, yes," McCoy agreed.

"But as to runnin' the rest of us—that's different."

"I'm boss here," Grizzly repeated. "All the way. Don't make any mistake about that, McCoy."

"That," said McCoy, "is where you're makin' a mistake, Grizzly. Since yuh figger it that way, though—well, it's time we had a new boss, eh, boys?"

No one answered, but it was plain that several of them were behind him. McCoy leaped suddenly, his big boot lashing out, aimed at Grizzly's stomach. So sudden and swift was the attack that it seemed impossible that it could be avoided.

CHAPTER XIII

Backwoods Battle

HAD THAT treacherous kick found its mark, it would have gone a long way toward settling the issue then and there. It would have felled even so powerful a man as Grizzly, leaving him dazed and gasping for breath, at the mercy of a ruthless antagonist.

But Grizzly had not risen to his position of leadership along the frontier without plenty of experience in just such fighting as faced him now, and he was as ruthless as McCoy. He dodged with the smooth and bewildering speed of the animal for which he had been nicknamed, reached out and grabbed McCoy's upflung boot, all in one motion.

Then, tensing himself, he spun suddenly, still holding onto the foot—his mighty muscles cording with the effort, jerking McCoy off his other foot, whirling so that he was outstretched like the spoke of a wheel. Once, twice, with accelerating speed, Grizzly spun, then let go suddenly.

Released, McCoy flew for a dozen feet, to fall heavily, sliding along the ground on his face. Instantly, Grizzly was leaping for him, jumping into the air, coming down with both feet set to smash him into the ground.

But this was a battle of giants. The tumble that Jules McCoy had taken would have knocked a lesser man cold, but somehow he managed to roll to one side as Grizzly came down, escaping that murderous assault; then, twisting, he reached out long arms, closed them about Grizzly's legs, and heaved, bringing him down as well.

Then they were tangling, there on the ground, rolling over and over, locked in each other's embrace. Bellew watched, a little appalled at the naked savagery of it. He had seen fights before, but never anything like this.

His face a reddened smear from his jarring slide on it, McCoy spat out a mouthful of blood and dirt, and twisted Grizzly down in a wrestling grip, one heavy thumb pressed on Grizzly's eye, gouging. A moment more and there would have been only a bloody socket there, but Grizzly twisted, heaving, his teeth closed on a finger and sank with a snap like the jaws of a bear trap. With a howl, McCoy leaped back and staggered free, finger almost severed.

For a moment then, they circled each other, warily, breathing hard. Jimmy, who had come a little closer to Bellew, was watching as tensely as the others. This was the same sort of primitive contest which might have been waged for her favor in the stone age, between men who had, for the moment, reverted as completely to savagery.

It was Grizzly who rushed this time, heavy fists flailing. McCoy met him, with a shock like the wagons in collision down the mountain the day before, and for a few moments they slugged. Then Grizzly landed a blow fairly on McCoy's chin, which flung him back for ten feet, so that he fell as hard as he had done the first time. And again Grizzly was rushing in for the kill.

ONCE more, despite that jarring fall, McCoy was able to twist and fight. Instead of grabbing for Grizzly, he rolled clear, came up, and this time his fingers had closed about a club a yard long and three inches through, a stout stick which happened to be lying there, some of the unused wood gathered for the fire. Whirling, he smashed savagely at Grizzly with it.

There was a sharp crack, and Grizzly staggered back. His attempt to dodge had been partially successful, so that, instead of catching him beside the head, the club had glanced off his shoulder, breaking as it hit.

McCoy flung down the useless stump remaining in his hand, and pushed the attack himself this time. But though Grizzly had been staggered, he was far from out. He ducked under McCoy's smashing fist, and his arms closed around his antagonist's waist, crushing, lifting.

With his first heave he swung McCoy off his feet, but by now McCoy had grabbed him in turn, and was hanging on desperately. For nearly a minute they twisted, locked together, grunting, heaving, Grizzly still endeavoring to break McCoy's hold, to heave him over his shoulder. A kick on the shins by McCoy brought a roar from him; then, lowering his head, he butted McCoy in the chest, bringing a hollow grunt in turn. As by mutual consent they let go of each other, started to step back, and each of them lashed out in a sudden kick, intended to take the other by surprise.

Their legs tangled, bringing them to the ground in a writhing heap, and out of this Grizzly emerged uppermost, sitting on his foe and pounding methodically at him with heavy fists, while McCoy struggled in vain to get loose or to hit back with sufficient force to shake him off.

It did not last long. McCoy went lax, his face a smear of blood. Grizzly stared down for a moment, heaved to his feet, and Bellew saw that he clutched a fair-sized round stone in his fist, had struck with that.

On his feet again, Grizzly looked around for a moment, shaking his head as if to clear it. Then he crossed to a bucket of water, caught it up and splashed it into McCoy's face. Grizzly seemed to be as vigorous and unharmed as at the beginning. McCoy groaned, stirred, and sat up, staring rather fearfully out of one eye which was rapidly closing, while the other was already swelled tightly shut.

"Get up!" Grizzly roared.

Unsteadily, wavering on his feet, McCoy managed to obey. But it was plain that he was so sick that he could barely stand. Grizzly's face was thrust up close to his, and the stark savagery in it at that moment was somehow more appalling than any of the fight had been.

"Want any more?" Grizzly demand.

McCoy shook his head, his face white under the smear of blood. Grizzly's great laugh boomed suddenly.

"Aimin' to dispute who's boss, any more, on this trip?" he asked.

Again, mechanically, as if fascinated, McCoy shook his head. The thing was almost pitiful.

Still Grizzly was not satisfied.

"You ready to admit that she's my woman—and keep it in mind?" he roared.

M'COY nodded, staggering back a little until he brought up against a tree. Grizzly watched him a moment contemptuously, then whirled back to face the others.

"Well?" he challenged. "Do you tooth-chatterin' children of misfortune know who's boss here now—or do some of the rest of you want a taste of what I gave him? Damn you, I'm Grizzly Brent—and what I say goes. Any of you feelin' lucky or foolish enough to want to dispute that?"

Bellew's eyes ranged to the faces of the others—those faces which had held the same look, a few minutes before, as had been in McCoy's, and which was in Grizzly's now. Some of them had been ready for revolt, behind McCoy. A few of them were as big as McCoy, and looked to be as tough.

But none would meet Grizzly's glance now. They were almost as subdued as McCoy himself, who was still standing there, supported by the tree, but scarcely more than conscious; a perfect example of the battering power in Grizzly's big fists, the relentless might of the man, his ability to take punishment and keep on giving it, and, above all, the savage ruthlessness of him. The lesson seemed to have been well learned.

For a long moment Grizzly stared at them, challengingly, waiting. Bellew was a little off to one side now, away from the circle, and though he knew that Grizzly was aware of him, the boss did not even bother to look at him. He passed him over with a contemptuous indifference, watching the others. Then, as it was plain enough that they were cowed, he flung back his head for another gargantuan roar, which echoed back from the hills like the mocking laughter of the gods on Olympus.

"Nice little lambs, all of you," he chortled. "Baa-ing woolly blatters. Well, that's the way it's healthiest. I'm boss here—and don't make the mistake of forgetting it. Except that we need him to drive his wagon, I'd have killed McCoy—and if there's any more trouble, I might not think of that, next time."

He whirled suddenly to look at Jimmy Carran.

"Well, sweetheart," he said. "You'd ought to like me now—the one man in the bunch!"

There was a look of sick fear in Jimmy's eyes as she met his glare. For a moment she stared back at him, then instinctively turned her eyes to look at Bellew, with a look of hopeless pleading.

Grizzzly saw the look, and again his laugh boomed ruthlessly.

"Lookin' at the tenderfoot, eh?" he demanded. "If you want a man, there's only one in camp. And I'm not feeling so good-natured as I was, a spell back. When I want something, I want it. You better make up your mind, the same as the rest of them have. Or do you expect Blaze to help you?"

Suddenly his eyes narrowed with a new suspicion, and he turned his look full on Bellew.

"BY GOLLY, I just thought of something. You've been turnin' to Blaze for everything, since the start of the trip—going off for walks with him, and it's been Blaze this and Blaze that. I figured you was just two weaklings together—but did you know she was a woman, Blaze?"

The rage which had been in Bellew had cooled now—but it was a stiller, deadlier thing than before. He had seen the smashing power in Grizzly's fists, the utter, savage ruthlessness of the man, and how easily he had dealt with Jules McCoy, the one man who had dared to challenge him.

For a moment, something like panic had come to Bellew as he watched. But that was gone again now. He knew that, by rights, he should be afraid, knew that he was up against something compared to which even the grimmest episodes of the past were mild experiences. But he wasn't afraid. And that knowledge held a curious fascination for him.

Back in Hell Roaring, he had been afraid—afraid for his neck, afraid of what the long trail might hold, afraid of life itself. But all that had been washed away, somewhere in between. He was under no illusions as to what might happen, but he wasn't worried about it.

"Sure, I knew it," he agreed calmly.

Grizzly glared, his eyes darkening in sudden rage again.

"You knew it," he repeated. "And you didn't say anything! You, a damned tenderfoot that I took along to keep your neck out of the noose! I suppose you've been thinking that she's *your* woman, eh?"

"I hadn't thought about it that way," Bellew admitted. "I just thought of her as a woman, who deserved a fair break."

"Oh, that's the way, eh?" Grizzly sneered. "Well, you wouldn't be suggestin' that she ain't getting it now, would you?"

"She wouldn't get it, if you or McCoy had your way," Bellow retorted. "But she's going to get it, just the same."

HE HAD raised his voice a little, sharply, edged with some of that cold, deadly anger which had been seething in him. He caught Jimmy's quick, half startled, half wondering look at him, saw the sheer amazement on the faces of the other men—all save Long Ike, who was merely watchful. For a moment, amazement wiped away everything else on Grizzly's face.

He stared for a moment, feet spread wide apart, head thrust forward, as though doubting the evidence of his ears. Then he threw back his head and laughed again—and at the ridicule in it, Bellew's anger mounted higher.

"Listen to him!" Grizzly shouted. "Why, you puny, weak-kneed, milk-fed mollycoddle! Didn't you see what happened to McCoy?"

"He got what was coming to him." Bellew nodded grimly.

"Oh, he got what was coming to him, did he?" Grizzly gibed. Then his voice was suddenly savage again. "And so will you get what's coming to you, if you get in my way. Get out of it—and keep out of it!"

He reached suddenly, with that astonishing quickness which he had shown before, one hand closed on Jimmy's wrist before she could jerk away.

"We're going to our tent, now," he said.

Bellew's anger had reached its highest pitch, but it was still that cold, deadly rage, which left him clearheaded. In utter contempt, Grizzly had turned away from him, leaving the point of his jaw fully exposed. Bellew swung, his whole weight behind the blow, landing it cleanly where he wanted it, with a crack such as had sounded when McCoy and Grizzly came together.

Grizzly stood for a moment, swaying a little, his eyes suddenly blank. His fingers loosed their hold on Jimmy's wrist. Then, like a falling tree, he crashed to the ground.

CHAPTER XIV

Another Day

GRIZZLY was out cold. Bellew blew on his knuckles ruefully, staring at the blood seeping through the skin. He had hit exactly as he aimed to do, with a careful precision and knowledge gained in more than one boxing bout, knowing what the result would be, what it had to be, if he struck as he aimed to. But the hardness of Grizzly's chin was, as Ike would have put it, plumb amazin'.

Bellew looked around, suddenly conscious of the silence, of the way the others were looking at him. The campfire had died to smouldering embers, and one of these burst with a sharp pop, flinging up a curtain of light which showed the gaunt, strained, unbelieving faces, the tenseness of men who were trying to readjust themselves to the impossible.

What he had done hadn't surprised him any. In a long fight, the odds, as he had known well enough, would have been against his winning. But to knock any man out, even Grizzly, with an opening such as the boss had presented to him—that wasn't anything to get excited about. The surprising thing would have been if he had failed.

Evidently the others didn't regard it that way. Long Ike had crossed in two quick strides and was pummeling him affectionately on the back; and Jimmy was regarding him with a new light in her eyes, and with a color on her cheeks which might have been the reflection of the fire-glow, but was more than that—so much more that he caught his own breath for a moment at the beauty of her.

The others were crowding around him then, exclaiming, wanting to shake his hand. Even the Dude was less supercilious than usual. After a moment, Pecos Smith paused to squint down at the prone figure of Grizzly, to stir him none too gently with his foot.

"Sleepin' right peaceful," he pronounced. "Blaze, yuh must pack a wallop like a mule's kick. But he'll be wakin' up ag'in right soon now, and when he does—wa-ll, that's the time tuh look out."

'Ike spoke, from a deeper wisdom and truer analysis of Grizzly's character.

"Won't be trouble tonight, Blaze," he prophesied. "Not after the way you put him to sleep. He'll be nice as a bee bringin' honey—but sometime when yuh ain't expectin' trouble, look out for his sting! Some snakes don't rattle 'fore they strike," he amplified more grimly.

Grizzly was stirring again now. He

sat up, still a little dazed, looking around blankly.

"What happened?" he inquired.

"Nothin' much," Pecos cackled. "Blaze hit yuh, was all."

"Blaze?" Anger filmed Grizzly's eyes, etched by red, as he lurched to his feet. "What with?"

"What do yuh s'pose?" Pecos spat out. "Think he'd pack a barn along to throw at yuh? He used his fist. One lick. And it was plenty. And if he'd of been yuh, I reckon likely he'd of gone right ahead and finished the job by trompin' the livin' daylights out of yuh. Which he didn't."

GRIZZLY blinked, staring around at the circle of unfriendly faces hemming him in. Their attitude had undergone a subtle change in the last few minutes. While he hesitated, Bellew spoke.

"I'm not looking for any trouble, Grizzly," he said bluntly. "But there's one thing that might as well be understood, first as last. Jimmy is a woman, but she's going to be treated exactly the same as she has been all along—except that from now on she gets the respect that's due a woman—and she's going to have that tent for her own use. Nobody's going to bother her, now or any other time. Otherwise, things will be the same as before, so far as I'm concerned."

"Sure, sure," Grizzly agreed absently. He was looking at Bellew strangely, as the others had done. The red had died out of his eyes, and as Ike had predicted, he quite plainly was not looking for more trouble—not now.

"First time I've ever been knocked out, that I remember of," he said, amazement still in his voice.

"Guess I needed it, though," he added unexpectedly.

"Out here, we get sort of savage and kind of lose our heads sometimes. Even if we don't mean it."

He looked around, after that astonishing admission, and even smiled a little.

"Well, that's done with, now, and tomorrow's another day. Everybody'd better get some sleep."

"Just one thing before we hit the hay," Bellew insisted. "We're moving that tent over by my wagon, and it will be pitched there, every night, from now on. I'll sleep where I can keep an eye on it."

Grizzly raised no objection. The transfer was made without comment from anyone; then, before going into her new abode, Jimmy stood for a moment, looking at Bellew. The others had already sought their blankets. She was framed by the tent flap on either side, the moon making a glory overhead. Her eyes were soft and luminous, and her lips quivered for a moment.

"Blaze," she said, "I—I don't know how to thank you, but I—since I am a woman, I—I'd like to kiss you—just once, Blaze."

Bellew was suddenly conscious of his own embarrassment, which equalled her own. But he removed his cap and came over to her, aware now of the faint, elusive, sweet perfume of her. It was like the forest itself, a clean, intangible something which was more of the spirit.

"Why, I—I'd sure like it, Jimmy," he stammered.

He was aware of her hands on his head, pulling it down, of warm, soft lips against his own for a moment, with a taste of salt on them, as though unbidden tears had spilled in that instant. Then, flushing scarlet, Jimmy had ducked back into the tent, and the flap rustled softly like the murmur of a distant stream.

BELLEW stood for a moment looking down at it, turned and crawled under the wagon and into his own blankets in a daze; then, remembering, he reached his revolver down from the holster and slipped it under the wadded-up coat which served as a pillow. From where he lay, he could reach out and touch the edge of Jimmy's tent. It gave him a comfortable feeling to know that she was so close, that she slept under his protection. Comforting, too, was the bulge of the gun.

He had been tired, but he wasn't sleepy now. For the first time since returning to camp, he had not only the time but the inclination to think,

and he was a little amazed at himself, and still more so at the outcome of his clash with Grizzly. It had been so ridiculously easy—and Grizzly had accepted it so meekly. He remembered Long Ike's warning, and the unmerciful beating that the boss had administered to Jules McCoy.

McCoy had hit Grizzly just as hard as he had, time and again. It had been like bouncing a rubber ball off a rock. The difference had lain in the fact that Bellew had known just where to hit and how to make it count—and had been lucky enough to get the right opening. But knocking a man out wasn't any assurance that he was licked.

Those thoughts were disturbing, but they vanished, overshadowed by thoughts of Jimmy, of her lips aaginst his, the sweetness of her—and the way she trusted him.

Not until he was sinking off to sleep did he rouse with the sudden remembrance that, tonight, he had aimed to challenge Grizzly about the danger from Indians, to demand that a watch be kept. He had forgotten about the very existence of red foes in the forest—and this was Indian country.

He pulled on his boots, slipped out from under the wagon and went a little way, then halted in relief. On a vantage point nearby, above the main camp, was silhouetted Long Ike's form, and he nodded affably as Bellew came up.

"Just figgered it'd be a good idea to keep an eye out," he explained. "I mentioned as much tuh Pecos, and he'll take the second watch. You go back to bed, Blaze. Yuh've earned a night's sleep."

His heart warming, Bellew complied. These men, in the aggregate, might be a tough crew, but there was a lot to them that showed as pure gold in time of trouble. If Indians did attack, he couldn't think of a bunch he'd sooner have to fight with. And with men like Long Ike and Pecos keeping watch, there wasn't much danger, even with the camp spread out as it was. Tomorrow they'd see that it was arranged differently when night came.

THERE was a certain tension in camp the next morning, though no one made any reference to the events of the night. Jimmy came out of her tent, fresh-eyed and with a new vivacity which had been absent before, and her smile for Bellew made words unnecessary. Her tent was folded and placed on Bellew's wagon, and though every man this morning was respectful and more careful of his language than in the past, there was a careful avoidance of any reference to Jimmy's changed status in the camp. Or to Bellew's, for that matter, though his position, too, had been changed by the night.

"'Taint everybody can down Grizzly with one lick," Ike commented, when they were alone for a moment, before the wagons began to roll. "And yuh plumb impressed everybody, after what he had just done tuh McCoy. That poor devil can hardly set his wagon this mornin'. But keep that in mind, Blaze, and remember what I said about keepin' yore eyes open!"

The going today was better than it had been for a long time, the road more on the level, winding off along a gradually widening valley. Even at that, it was far from good going. There were creeks to cross, and hills to go up and down with monotonous regularity, most of them small but often steep; and ever and always the problem of choosing a trail where there was no road to begin with. Grizzly was the trail boss again today, sharply watchful, his attitude outwardly unchanged from the day before.

With the dawn, clouds had overspread the sky, blotting out the first streaks of sunlight which had tried unsuccessfully for a few minutes to warm a gradually growing chill in the air. By mid-morning the clouds were low, hunched like gray ghosts of trouble around the mountains, and there was a still, breathless quality to the air which portended storm.

"Snow before night," Ike said briefly, and his words were like the other signs—portents of trouble.

At mid-afternoon there were a few lazy flakes of snow in the air. And

there was another of the innumerable bad spots in the road. On one side a hill climbed steeply, while below on the other side it had been sliding away with the rains and spring thaws for untold years, to a dark creek which ran in hushed expectancy a hundred feet below, picking its way among ragged boulders. The road, never before used for such a purpose, was sloping enough, and with a bare yard to spare beyond the edge of the wagon wheels and the brink.

Grizzly edged his outfit safely past it, halted them, and came back on foot to where Bellew's ten horses were making the precarious passage. Bellew jerked the line to stop them, while Grizzly walked along the lower side, holding to the wagon to keep from being crowded off, and made an examination of the road.

"Guess you'll be all right," he nodded. "I was afraid the ground might start to slide under your wheels. Have to watch here, or there'll be hell to pay."

He circled the wagon, went back again, now on the uphill side, then, from up ahead signaled to Bellew to come ahead again.

BELLEW reached for the jerk-line, then checked. Everything seemed to be all right, and Grizzly had made an examination to be certain that it was. But an alarm was ringing in Bellew's head, the sort of thing tht Long Ike would call a hunch. Ike's words of warning kept recurring to him. That was it! It wasn't like Grizzly to trouble himself at a time like this, not when things were going ahead as smoothly as now. If there was any danger, the thing would have been to urge Bellew to speed up, not to halt at such a spot while he had a look. After he was past, it might pay to have a look before the next wagon started across.

Instead of jerking the line, Bellew swung to the ground, on the upper side of the wagon, and circled it. He didn't know yet what he suspected, nor what he was looking for, but that sense of trouble was strong in him. And up ahead, he saw, Grizzly had stopped, head hunched a little forward, like that of his four-footed namesake, and was watching him with suddenly strained attention, instead of moving his own outfit on out of the way.

Yet everything looked all right. The ground here was perfectly solid, with no indication of cracking or sliding beneath the wheels. Nothing to get nervous about—

Then he saw it. More by chance than anything else, for he hadn't looked for any such thing as that. Grizzly had walked past there, pausing for just a moment or two, hidden by the side of the wagon from Bellew's gaze, and by a slight turn in the road from the others coming along behind. There was nothing unusual in stopping for a few moments, and it had taken only a few. But as Bellew's eyes caught it, he understood instantly. The nut which held the rear wheel on the axle was missing.

It could mean only one thing. Grizzly had come back here with this deliberate purpose in mind, stopping Bellew at this point to be sure of accomplishing it. He had carried a wrench with him, out of sight under his coat, had given a quick twist or so to the nut and had taken it off, during that pause.

And that was proof enough of what Long Ike had said about Grizzly's sting behind honeyed words. Grizzly had met Jules McCoy's challenge fairly, had licked him with a brutal thoroughness. But Blaze Bellew had hit him only once, knocking him cold for two or three minutes, and that was something new in Grizzly's experience. Something that he was afraid of, as this testified. And the depths of his hatred were revealed in the thing he had done now.

Getting the wagon train through had been his main concern, from the start at Hell Roaring. Now his hate was bigger than his concern for it. With the nut off, within the next twenty or thirty feet, that ponderous rear wheel, with the road sloping outward toward the brink and the load pressing heavily, would roll off.

When that happened, the wagon would tip and roll down the incline to smashing ruin—pulling the horses with it, and, almost as certainly, smashing Bellew as it went.

To insure Bellew's death Grizzly had been willing to sacrifice part of the wagon train. With Bellew out of the way, there would be no one to dispute his claim to Jimmy—

COLD rage boiled in Bellew again. The treacherous trick was lower than anything he would have expected, especially from Grizzly, but it had been done. With only one swift passing glance at the wheel, Bellew kept on walking toward the front of the wagon.

His attitude was as casual as Grizzly's had been. But as there had been something about Grizzly which had aroused his suspicion, so now there was something in turn which warned Grizzzly. As Bellew passed the front of the wagon without stopping, Grizzly straightened suddenly and flung up his arm.

It came with whizzing, deadly speed—the nut which he had removed from the axle, had held in his hand. There was no chance to dodge it. Bellew flung up his hands in an attempt to ward off the blow, and in that same moment he saw Grizzly's hand diving toward his holstered forty-five.

CHAPTER XV

Trophy of the Hunt

HERE was showdown. Dazed and undecided, Grizzly had avoided it the night before, preferring to wait until he could have it on his own terms. And this had seemed to him to be the perfect opportunity, not for administering a licking to the one man he both hated and feared, but for wiping him out altogether. If Bellew's wagon had gone over the brink and ended up in a pile of wreckage, with Bellew pinned under it, no one would have had reason to guess that it had not been just another accident of this unmapped trail.

That trick hadn't worked, for Bellew had discovered Grizzly's treachery. Now it was between them, and Grizzly was aiming to settle it in a hurry, giving Bellew no chance; then, with gun or fists to both, to dominate the others and make them like it.

His gun was already clearing leather. Bellew's action was more instinctive now than planned. Of late years he had been soft, but there had been a time, at college, when he had swum and boxed and played baseball. Never enough to harden him as he was hardened now, but the experience came in handy today.

He caught the four-inch iron nut as it came grabbing it in both hands, allowing his arms to swing with the motion of it, for it had come hard and fast. Then, with his right arm up, he flung the nut sweeping back at Grizzly again, his own aim as sure as Grizzly's had been.

It caught Grizzly on the arm as his gun was leveling, striking at the wrist and sliding along to the elbow before it dropped and rolled, and the gun, with the one shot going wild, was dropping with it. For a moment, Grizzly's arm was numbed, and this time Bellew wasn't losing any time in following up his advantage, charging along the narrow dug road between his horses, on to the broader open space where Grizzly waited.

Grizzly backed a few paces, so that he was beyond Bellew's lead horses, between them and his own wagon. And now, man to man, Bellew knew that this would be the fight he'd missed the night before.

There was ample room here, which helped. There were certain things which he had to do today, or perish. Bellew was under no delusions concerning the way he had knocked Grizzly out the night before. That had been luck as much as skill. He couldn't count on luck now. And if Grizzly once got those long arms around him, as he had done with McCoy, the result would probably be equally disastrous.

Grizzly was rushing now, swinging a murderous left as he came. Bellew had seen the day before that the boss knew nothing about boxing, but he

was experienced in rough and tumble fighting, and his astonishing quickness went a long way toward making up for his lack of skill. Bellew ducked and weaved, allowing Grizzly's fist to slide over his shoulder, and pounded both fists viciously into Grizzly's paunch, bringing a hoarse grunt from him; then he leaped back and away. . . .

SOMEHOW he was standing up to Grizzly, matching him blow for blow. It had been going on for a long time now—Bellew had almost lost count of such things. He knew that the others had come up and were watching, that he had been jarred savagely time and again by Grizzly's rock-like fists. But he was taking it, and giving it back with interest. Once he stumbled and went to one knee, but came up again before Grizzly could catch him. Once Grizzly's arms closed around him in that dreaded hold, and Bellew jerked an arm loose, caught Grizzly beside the head, and dazed him momentarily—long enough to twist free.

It couldn't go on that way much longer. Human flesh could stand just so much. But in Bellew's mind the conviction was growing that he would win. A fierce joy coursed through him as Grizzly hit him, for he was hard—toughened by those gruelling weeks on the trail, able to take it. And into Grizzly's eyes was coming a look of doubt, almost of fear.

But he wasn't done yet. Too much hinged on the outcome of this fight, which he had started with an attempt at murder. That attempt hadn't worked, but there was nothing to lose and possibly something to gain in a second try. Grizzly reeled back, half turning around, and his hands went to his shirt front as though he were dazed. As he turned again, Bellew saw the hidden wrench as he jerked it loose—the wrench that Grizzly had used to twist that nut off the wagon wheel.

There was no time to throw anything this time—and nothing to throw. But Bellew still had his fists, and Grizzly no longer trusted to his. Laughing shortly and fiercely, Bellew leaped, and his fist caught the point of Grizzly's jaw again as he raised the wrench.

It was a good blow—as good as the one he had landed the night before. The difference, this time, was that Grizzly's guard was partly up, deflecting it. Grizzly rocked back on his heels, but the wrench had caught Bellew a glancing blow beside the head, and he staggered back in turn, a smear of blood coursing down from a cut scalp, running into his right eye. Blinding flame and rushing darkness seemed to leap from a reeling pit of earth, while Blaze's legs had gone wobbly.

For a space of second the two of them stood, half a dozen paces apart, nearly out. The wrench had dropped from Grizzly's nerveless hand and lay on the ground between them, unheeded by both. The onlookers were watching tensely, but obeying the old, unwritten law of the border that they must not interfere—not so long as it went as it was going.

It was the taste of blood in his mouth that jerked Bellew out of his stupor. The one of them who recovered first could end it now, and it had to be himself. Jimmy Carran was watching him with clenched fists and parted lips, her eyes imploring him to keep on his feet. He didn't see the others, but he staggered ahead again, conscious that Grizzly was advancing to meet him, with something of the old cunning creeping back into those little, reddened, wicked eyes—eyes so much like those of a four-footed grizzly.

AS HIS head cleared, Bellew realized one thing with grim clarity. He was tough, from those grueling weeks on the road, but Grizzly was tougher. Grizzly's staying powers were vastly superior to his own, after the first few minutes of such a battle as this. If he was to win at all, it had to be now, before the sheer weight and power of Grizzly wore him down.

Bellew lowered his head and butted.

The unexpectedness of it caught

Grizzly off guard, and his breath went out of him in a hollow grunt. Big hands clawed for a hold, but strength was coming back to Bellew. He drove both fists, trip-hammer fashion, at Grizzly's tortured middle, straightening him up as he had started to double over in agony, smashing relentless blows to his neck and face, driving him back now, battered and helpless, unable to stop, to throw a blow in return.

It had been a lot of luck the night before, knocking Grizzly out as he had done. Bellew appreciated that now. Hit him as he would, he couldn't crack that impregnable rock-like jaw again or drive him quite down. But the very fury of his attack was having almost as sure a result. Grizzly retreated, tripped, and tried desperately to save himself, lunging, groping blindly for his antagonist. Bellew slugged him to a stop, and as he started to collapse, grabbed him in turn, laughing again, to hold him until he could finish him.

Grizzly's coat tore in his hands, ripping away, and this time, with a new and stark terror showing in his eyes, Grizzly managed to jerk back and away. This time he did not try to rush, to attack again. His face had the look of a rabbit, watching the inexorable advance of a weasel, the same desperate quest for a way of escape.

The man was licked—beaten, but still dangerous. Bellew recognized that, and laughed again, a wild, savage sound which both startled and shocked him. He stopped as suddenly, the laugh dying in his throat, staring with widening, unbelieving eyes at that which showed in the tear of Grizzly's coat.

There had been a rip there before, in the lining, and Grizzly had made use of that tear before sewing it up again. Something had been hidden inside, a something which was now tumbling out and to the ground, where a large flake of snow fell upon it and glistened for a moment before it melted like a tear.

The eyes of everyone were fixed upon that thing now, including Grizzly's—and a higher terror leaped in his own as he saw and knew that the others understood.

For the thing which lay there was a bit of hide and hair—hide and hair which only a few days before had belonged to a man who had come to their camp and gone on again, boasting that he had struck it rich, that he was getting out of that country so as to keep his hair from being lifted by an Indian.

And that same night his scalp had been taken. Now it had fallen out of Grizzly's coat—a gory, horrible, somehow pitiful thing, the red hair matted but unmistakable.

CHAPTER XVI

The Trail Divides

SNOW had been coming down sporadically for the last half-hour—heavy, feathery flakes which had melted as they struck, but only a few of them. Now, whipped by a sudden gust of wind, the air was full of them, a blinding flurry. And in the storm, quick to take advantage of the opportunity, Grizzly turned and vanished.

Pursuit was swift, but before he could be caught he had plunged down the steep slope below the road, half sliding, half jumping, into the water below, splashing across the creek and being quickly lost to sight in the gusty fury of the storm. Not far away was a dense stand of evergreens, and once in this, it would be almost impossible to trail him, even without the covering snow.

"The dirty so and so," Pecos swore, when they had returned to the wagons again. "Again tuh think I've chawed the same grub with him for all these weeks! If I'd known what he was—"

Bellew felt a little sick at the discovery. It had been bad enough, that night, coming upon the slain prospector and supposing that the mutilation was the work of an Indian. Finding that it was Grizzly who had sneaked back and slain him for his gold, then had scalped him to make it appear, if the body was ever found, that it had been the work of an In-

dian—that made the whole affair far more horrible, even as it explained Grizzly's indifference to the possibility of an Indian attack since then. He had known well enough that there was no danger from Indians at the time.

"Darn funny that he'd keep such a thing, though," Long Ike growled, and spat. "I've thought he stunk more than usual, lately, but sort of put it down to his not takin' no baths. Well, we can give what remains of that poor feller a burial, anyway. A skelp ain't much, but it sort of comes from the top."

By now the storm had settled to a steady, driving pace, and the ground was becoming white. In this, they dug a small grave and with what seemed like appropriate ceremony committed the remains of the trapper to it. Pecos Smith cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"Reckon mebby we ought tuh have a few words of pray'r," he suggested. "Though I, for one, ain't much in that line." His face brightened. "Uh—Miss Jimmy, mebby that'd be a little more in yore line, eh?"

"I'll be glad to say a few words," Jimmy agreed gravely, and while heads were uncovered, prayed simply and reverently. Then they turned back to more immediate and grave concerns.

"Reckon we'd better get the rest of the wagons across this here dug road, then camp for the night," Long Ike suggested. "Eh, Blaze?"

"Looks like a good idea," Bellew agreed, and started toward his own outfit, then halted again. Grizzly's wagon had to be gotten out of the way before the rest of them could proceed. Answering his unspoken thought, Ike nodded.

"You drive his wagon and pick a place, Blaze. I'll drive yore wagon—here's that nut off'n the wheel—then I'll git mine. It's last in line."

A quarter of a mile farther on, past the narrow road, in a natural clearing on a big, tree-bordered meadow, they made camp, the wagons forming in a close, compact ring under Ike's supervision. Preparations for supper went ahead as usual, but tonight, partly because of the driving, relentless storm, partly because of what had occurred, the wilderness seemed more wild and unfriendly than at any time in the past.

LITTLE was said until the meal was finished and all were gathered about the leaping bonfire. It was Pecos who broke the silence, combing lean fingers through his whiskers.

"There's some things we've got tuh face, and decide," he said. "And I reckon there ain't going to be no better time than the present. From the looks of things, winter's here, now—and if I know anything about this country, which I'm danged afraid I do, it's here tuh stay. Which brings up the next question. Do we keep on with these wagons, and try to get them through tuh Bang-Up, as originally intended, or do we take some of the hosses and try tuh get ourselves tuh s'd camp in the wilderness?"

"What's yore opinion, Pecos?" Van Kyle demanded.

"Well, there's two ways of lookin' at it," Pecos said cautiously. "It'll be one sweet job tuh keep the wagons travelin' from now on. Offhand, I'd say our chances of gettin' there would be considerable improved if we left the wagons behind. On the other hand, if we was to get there without them, we'd likely be about as welcome as a wolf at a rabbit's picnic, for it's more'n even up that them that are there now, and us besides, would starve before the winter was over."

"I think it's our business to keep on with the wagons," Bellew spoke up. "That's what we were hired to do. And, after all, we're not working for Grizzly Brent. It's Big John Carravan's pay that we're taking."

"I'd say the same," Jules McCoy agreed unexpectedly. Jules was still far from his normal self, but he had stuck to the job on the wagon that day. "Either way, it's a toss-up whether we get to see another spring, but let's keep trying to push these wagons through."

"Any objection tuh that?" Pecos asked, bright-eyed. "If there ain't, there's a bigger thing tuh settle—

though I don't reckon there'll be any argument about that, either. Grizzly was a good train boss—we'll have tuh give the devil his due, and admit that. But he's gone, now, and somebody has tuh be in charge of things."

"And that's Blaze," Long Ike nodded placidly.

"My idee exactly," Pecos agreed. "Blaze, he was a tenderfoot, on startin' this trip, but he's learnt plenty, and he's the only man among us could stand up tuh Grizzly. Everybody that's in favor of Blaze, lift yore hands."

Every hand went up without hesitation. Bellew stared around him for a moment, a little bewildered by this manifestation of confidence, and more stirred than he cared to confess. Then he stood up, his eyes a little troubled.

"Why, uh—boys," he said huskily, and cleared his throat, "I wasn't expecting anything like this. I appreciate your confidence in me, but, like Jules says, and Pecos, I'm a tenderfoot. And it'll be a tough job from here on. Some of the rest of you, like Pecos, know a lot more about how to handle it than I do."

"That's what yuh'd call a matter of opinion," Pecos retorted. "So far as what any of us know, we'll help yuh out any way we can, Blaze, any time. But yuh're the wagon boss from here on, and you give the orders."

Bellew hesitated, then nodded. He recognized that he was the logical man for the job, for the same reason that Grizzly had been the logical man before him—because he was the physical master of any man there, and had won to leadership by licking Grizzly. Other traits might count for something in this country, and in some places, like the civilized east, they would weigh far more heavily than physical prowess. But here, in the wilderness, that was the dominant factor.

So it was up to him, whether he liked it or not. No one else could hold the men and the train together. Above all else, he was Jimmy's protector.

The attitude of most of the men had undergone a decided change toward her in the last twenty-four hours. The fall of Grizzly the night before had put Bellew's own philosophy uppermost, and they were willing to accept it. But with a different boss, that would not be so certain. For her sake, if for no other reason, it was up to him to continue in charge—to get the wagons through.

For the first time he was beginning to realize what a staggering job that might be, now that winter had caught up with them. They still had a long way to go, an unmapped wilderness with no road at all. And he perceived a danger which had not occurred to him before. Deep snow could cover a multitude of bad places—fallen logs, upjutting stones, sharp holes or crevices, any of which could injure or wreck a wagon which might fall into it without knowing that it was there.

Morning brought sunshine, which came up dazzlingly over a white world, and gave way to clouds within a half-hour. That, after the unusual brightness, was a relief to the eyes, but there was a keener chill to the air today, and snow lay a foot deep on the level. Snow which no longer showed any inclination to melt.

BELLEW had already assigned one of the wagons to the horse wrangler, to take Grizzly's place. They could still keep going so far as the crew was concerned, but the question which now arose was where to go. Bellew recalled Long Ike's words when the two of them had been alone—that he had figured that Grizzly was swinging too far west to reach Bang-Up.

Their main route lay north, of course. But a slight deviation of angle would swing them a long way off from the mining camp, far enough perhaps to mean disaster. Had Grizzly been doing it purposely, with the idea of losing the train somewhere in a wintry wilderness and so bringing about, if he could, the ruin of Big John Carravan? Or had he aimed to swing off to find a better trail, and bend back when opportunity offered? His herculean efforts to keep the whole train going seemed

to indicate that he had had some better fate in mind for it than being stranded in the end.

Taking the wrangler's pony, Bellew rode ahead a couple of miles, swung, and climbed to a hilltop. He studied the lowering gray of the landscape with keen eyes, then shook his head.

Here was a valley, averaging now a mile in width, partly wooded. However, there was enough treeless meadow to enable them to pick a road through it. As it went on, the valley appeared to widen. But up ahead was something that raised a problem which might not be so easy to solve. He rode back to camp and reported.

"We've got a nice, easy valley to travel in, for a few miles, and it seems to widen out as it goes along."

"That's luck, at last," Pecos nodded, and spat, making a brown smear on the snow. "Valley heads the same way we want tuh go, too."

"For a ways," Bellew agreed. "Then it divides—two branches. One going northeast, the other northwest. Which is the right one to Bang-Up?"

The resultant argument was not helpful. Four of them claimed to know at least something about this general country, but not much. Long Ike and Jules McCoy declared that they had to take the turning to the east. Pecos Smith and Chatterton insisted as stoutly that they would never see Bang-Up unless they swung to the west.

CHAPTER XVII

Feathered Death

BELLEW listened, and nodded grimly. His face gave no indication of the sinking of his heart during this discourse. Up to then he hadn't realized quite how much he was counting on helpful advice from these other men who claimed to know this country, about how to get to Bang-Up. But he saw now, quite clearly, that they didn't really know much more about it than he did, and that whatever decisions were made, he had to make them. The full responsibility was his.

Jimmy came to stand beside him, and somehow there was comfort in her presence, though she said nothing. He turned to her.

"Jimmy, you're as old a hand in this country as anybody, and I have an idea that maybe you know more about it than any of them. What's your opinion?"

She smiled gravely at him and shook her head.

"I wish I knew, Blaze. I've never been to Bang-Up, and I don't even know, within a considerable radius, just where it is. All that I've got to go by is that they say it's located on Horseshoe Creek."

Bellew snatched at that.

"That ought to locate it pretty definitely, I should think."

Jimmy shook her head.

"It's named Horseshoe Creek because it makes such big circles. At one point they say it's forty miles from itself; then it swings in a big U and comes back finally to within a couple of miles of itself again. I don't know where Bang-Up may be, on it, and I don't believe that anybody does, from the south. Bang-Up is just a new camp, somewhere on Horseshoe. Grizzly knew—but he was the only one."

Bellew relayed this information to the others. "Do any of you really know?" he challenged.

Again there was considerable argument. But it was plain enough that no one did know, exactly. Long Ike, however, came up with another piece of thought-provoking information.

"That's all new country to me, on the Horshoe," he said. "But my dad, he trapped through there mebby fifteen years ago, before there was any Bang-Up—or any Hell Roaring or railroad, for that matter. And I remember one thing he told me. Somewhere on that big swing it makes, the Horseshoe runs through a range of hills that Paw described as being about as high and hard to cross, even in summer, as anything yuh could ask for. Come winter, yuh couldn't never cross them with wagons. And there ain't no trail beside the creek, neither. For a mile or so, it goes through a canyon mebby a thousand

feet deep that it's been cuttin' there since time began."

Which meant, more than ever, that making the wrong choice would be fatal. Bellew challenged him flatly.

"After remembering that, do you still think we should swing East, Ike?"

Ike pondered, grinning without mirth.

"Dog-gone, Blaze," he confessed, "more I think, the less I know about it. Sort of seems so, and then ag'in, it don't seem so good."

"Get going," Bellew ordered briefly, with a glance at the steadily lowering clouds. "The cook will drive my wagon today, and Pecos can take the lead. You can travel all day to reach the branch. I'm going ahead and do some scouting, before I make up my mind."

He waved to Jimmy, and kicked the horse in the ribs with savage impatience. This was a devil of a situation to hand a man—to make him leader just at a time when he had to make a decision which at best could be only guesswork. And the wrong guess would be fatal.

Fatal, at least, for those miners in Bang-Up, who were still hopefully looking for this wagon train to swing into sight with the provisions which they needed so desperately in order to survive the winter. Bellew could picture the situation rather accurately in his mind. They had struck it rich, there, had sent out word that they would pay, and pay well, for a jerk-line train full of food and supplies. They had gone on the white man's ancient theory that money, in sufficient quantities, can buy anything.

SECURE in that belief and the knowledge that Big John Caravan was going to respond to their call, they had kept digging for gold while summer waned and winter crept down from the northern wastes. Up to then, it would have been possible for them to abandon the camp and get out.

Now that chance would be gone. To travel, with winter closing down, and a hostile wilderness on every side, would be at least as big a hazard for them as for the wagon train toiling painfully toward their rescue. With one reservation.

There were more men in Bang-Up, of course. Going in a group, they would be reasonably safe against attack, and might win out. But, knowing human nature pretty well, Bellew knew that they wouldn't do that. Most of them would stay on, digging for gold, while supplies grew scanty, hoping up to the last moment. If things became desperate, a few of the more timid would start—and fall an easy prey to attackers. Then others—until, with the coming of spring, a ghost camp would remain.

So, the last analysis, the future of Bang-Up depended pretty much on getting the wagons through. And the danger which menaced the camp indirectly would challenge them directly. Indians. While Grizzly had been with them, Bellew had somehow not worried much about that. Grizzly had been so confident of finding a way, or making one. And Grizzly knew Indians.

Maybe that was the trouble. A squaw man, who would take a white man's scalp, knew them and their ways too well. Grizzly had plunged off into the wilderness, all but weaponless, without food or supplies. Probably he figured on making his way to the Indians and living with them, confident that he would be welcome.

Perhaps he had counted on that friendship with them to get the wagons through without attack. Now there would be no such possibility. And if the attack came, with them heavily outnumbered—

"We'll meet that when we come to it," Bellew told himself grimly, and kept riding. If there were Indians about, he was running a big risk in going off this way, alone. But he had a hunch that there wasn't much danger from them, not for another few days, at least. And if they could the wagons within striking distance of Bang-Up, could find definitely where it was, there might be ways of handling things then.

But the choice of which way to go was still strictly up to him.

He reached the fork, where the valley divided into two, as he had seen before. Both of the valleys were pretty good-sized here, partly wooded, partly clear, and each offered, at the outset, an easy trail for the wagons. But there was no chance here to attain an eminence and look ahead for a long distance. Even if he had been on a hill, the lowering clouds, the white earth which blended so perfectly with the gray sky a short distance off would have spoiled his view.

Streams flowed down from both valleys, joining here, winding on toward the south. And they were both of about an equal size. One of them must be the Horseshoe. But which one?

THE valley had narrowed here to little more than a quarter of a mile, though he had an idea that it widened again up ahead. But in this section was a morass of willows and other trees. The reason was easy to see. Beaver dams were spread everywhere.

The creek, which had flowed sluggishly here, had been closed with a dam, had spread out, and been checked again with more dams. Over a number of years these had increased and widened clear across the valley floor, until now there was water averaging from two to twenty feet deep, with a growth of trees and brush, reaching up the valley for at least a couple of miles. It would be virtually impassable for a man on horseback, and wagons would bog down hopelessly.

Bellew studied it almost with relief.

"Well, that settles that," he nodded. "We couldn't go that way if we wanted to. So we go the other—and hope for the best."

He gave his impatient cayuse its head to turn back. And at that moment, with a dull, scarcely perceptible whang, something missed his own body, and struck the horse, driving deep and quivering into its side, and protruded there—the haft of a feathered arrow. Bellew saw it almost unconsciously, for with one tremendous leap his stricken mount was rearing, plunging, falling—catching and pinning him beneath it as it died.

CHAPTER XVIII

Orders for the Boss

THAT arrow had been aimed for his own heart, but it had found his horse's heart instead. In that first moment the rather random thought came to Bellew; that his luck must still be good, otherwise he would be dead now.

But if it was luck, it wasn't of the sort that he would ordinarily choose. His horse had tumbled ten feet in that jump, and he was down in the water now, half buried under his horse, with only his head and shoulders and one hip out of the water. And the crushing weight of the horse seemed to rest entirely on him; a sharp, excruciating agony pound through his body, that for a moment made things whirl blackly.

It was the cold water which shocked him back to swift and stern reality. If he wasn't hopelessly broken of body, or so mired down that swift death would be a merciful release, then there was a still grimmer, more potent factor to consider. That arrow had been shot from a bow, and in this country it could mean only that an Indian had fired it at him—with dreadful accuracy. If these other things didn't kill him, he could expect another arrow, or a shower of them, very soon.

Strangely, there had been no exultant war-whoop as yet. He had never heard a war-whoop, but from all that he had ever read, it should have followed when a foe went down as he had done. But maybe individuals varied. It was just possible that his adversary wanted to make sure that he had something to yell about before he unlimbered, and in the meantime was not giving himself away if there was any danger of Bellew returning the compliment.

Twisting, blenching with the pain, Bellew saw that his six-gun was still

out of water, all except the lower tip of the holster and barrel. He closed his hand on it, not moving otherwise, and looked around.

The snow surrounding him was still as unbroken as ever. He had been riding on a narrow trail a few feet above the edge of the morass. Then, thirty feet farther away, a bit of snow fell from a clump of brush.

Bellew fired instantly. Somebody was hiding in that brush, and since they had to have a showdown, the sooner the better. To his increasing amazement, he saw a lean, youthful-seeming warrior rise up suddenly like a jack-in-the-box, clutching a bow in one hand and an arrow in the other. A brighter red smear was appearing above his heart, for he was naked from the waist up, despite the chill of the air.

For an instant he stood poised, then pitched forward and thrashed there in the snow. The echoes of the gun-shot whispered back from the far hills and were silent.

Nothing else stirred anywhere. For a moment longer Bellew waited, incredulous. It was entirely possible that this was a lone hunter who had figured on an excellent chance to take a scalp. In fact, Bellew wasn't at all sure that he had seen any war paint, or paint of any kind. It looked more like some adventurous young buck out on a lone scouting trip of his own.

If that was so, and there was no war party, he still had a chance, if he could get loose from this weight on top of him. The water, right here, was only about his waist, and not more than a foot deep, which had been his momentary salvation; and by pulling and wrenching, an act which brought cold sweat to his face and made him blench with pain, Bellew discovered that he could move a little.

HIS LEGS were pinned down, but they didn't seem to be broken. The real pain came from his body, as though ribs had been smashed in his fall. But the ground underneath was so thoroughly water-soaked that it was mud, and gradually, pausing for breath and to steady himself against the pain, he managed to drag himself from beneath the horse, to get to his feet, there in the water—an effort which nearly made him faint with pain—and take a step or two.

His arms and legs were all right, which was lucky. But there was no question but what he had some broken ribs, and he felt as if he were more or less broken up inside. Apparently it was less than it might have been, since he could move and stand. He steadied himself, sweating took two or three more steps to the bank and collapsed against it, half in and half out of the water.

Still nothing stirred around him. Only the one Indian had happened along, apparently, or there would have been more hostile gestures before now. And he was free of the horse. So far, good enough. But he couldn't ever walk back to the jointure of the valleys, not in such pain as a single step caused him. His ribs felt as if they would burst from his racked body. He couldn't even crawl far—not in that snow.

If he waited, the others would probably follow his trail and find him—finally. His jaw tightened at the thought. Moving with the scarcely turning wheels of the wagon train, it would be dark before they reached the fork of the valleys and made camp. And by then it would be snowing again. It would be utterly impossible for them to find him that night.

A new day would see his trail covered over, and even if they found him after a long search, he had a pretty definite feeling that it wouldn't matter to him by that time. He couldn't lie out here for twenty-four hours in such shape and see another dawn.

He had to get back. Jimmy would be expecting him. Jimmy—

How far was it? Not more than three miles, probably. Three miles. He couldn't make three hundred yards—not in this shape.

Speculatively he looked at the dead horse. There was a saddle blanket there, but it was too water-soaked to be of any possible use. A lariat rope was coiled and tied on beside the horn—

For a long moment he stared at it, dimly remembering something that he had heard one night in camp. Then, painfully, he worked his way back to the horse, fumbled with the water-soaked knots and got the rope loose. Once out on dry ground, he collapsed a second time with the fierce throbbing of the pain.

When it had relaxed, he sat up and went methodically to work—winding the lariat about his waist, loop after loop, tightening it grimly, jaws set hard, sweat pouring from his face as he did it. To get those dozen loops around himself and tied in place took a full hour, and it left him weak and limp, as though he had been doing the thing for ages.

But during all that time there had been no further hostile demonstration, which proved conclusively that this Indian had been all alone. Otherwise the gunshot would have brought an investigation before this. If he could get back to camp, he had his chance.

AFTER resting again, he felt considerably better. The rope had drawn him together, pushing broken ribs back in place to some extent, and while it still hurt, it wasn't such a shattering process to move or even to stand up. And only about a hundred feet away, if he could get that far, was a beaver dam.

Beaver dams were everywhere in here. The important thing about this one was that he saw a crotched stick on it that had been cut, as it happened, as if to his present need. It was about the right size and thickness for a crutch.

He reached the dam, waded in three-foot deep water to get the crutch and another stick which would serve as a cane, and got back to the shore again. Then, doggedly, he set out.

The crutch, and that lariat rope, holding him together, helped a lot. Enough to make it possible to move, after a fashion. With mind dulled by the constant throb and stab of pain, he hardly knew what went on, only that he kept going, with frequent stops to rest.

At first he tried sitting down, which was a relief, but getting back up was so much worse that he gave that up, and merely stood, back against a tree or rock if one was handy, otherwise leaning on the crutch till he could go on again.

Just when it began to snow again he didn't know, for he had lost count of time. Or when it began to grow dark. The only thing that had any meaning was that he had to keep going, following the trail which his horse had broken in the snow—keep going and get back to Jimmy.

He raised his head, stared, blinked, and stared again. For a minute he couldn't quite comprehend what the light he saw meant. Then his head cleared in a sudden rush. A campfire. That meant that the wagon train was ahead, and camped there. It was snowing steadily now, though it didn't seem to be so cold, and the darkness had a quality of absoluteness about it. But he could see the fire, which, in the storm, meant that it wasn't more than half a mile away.

Coolly now, he remembered his gun, drew it and fired three shots. A shot came in answer, and he fired again, and went woodenly forward. Someone shouted, and he tried to answer, gurgling a little with fresh pain.

Then Jimmy was suddenly beside him, her face anxious as she came close, but not exclaiming, merely coming to steady him and hold him as he leaned against her, suddenly at peace. Others appeared out of the darkness, picking him up bodily, with Jimmy adjuring them to be careful. They were trying to be, of course, but he winced and set his teeth. Long Ike and Pecos were carrying him.

"Here," he protested. "I'm not used to ridin' more'n one donkey at the same time."

He got the words out, and fainted completely.

He revived, to the touch of Jimmy's cool fingers on his forehead; then she was holding some sort of broth to his lips, bidding him drink. He did so, and felt considerably better. He discovered that he was in his blankets, the lariat rope off but his

ribs bandaged up, and looked around in sudden surprise to find that he was not only in bed, but in a tent—Jimmy's tent.

"I don't belong in here," he protested.

Jimmy smiled at him.

"You get some sleep," she said. "Maybe you're the big boss of this camp, but till you get better, I'm telling you what to do."

CHAPTER XIX

The Real McCoy

ANOTHER morning found sunshine stretched tight across a brilliantly white world. It had snowed several more inches during the night, then had cleared. There was scant relief for the eyes. Even the evergreens were so full of snow that they seemed blanketed.

"Reckon we'd better camp here for a day or two," Long Ike said anxiously, coming into Bellew's tent and twisting his cap in big hands while he watched Jimmy about some little task or other. "Looks like you wasn't hurt very bad, considerin'—but restin' up a spell will help considerable."

Bellew shook his head. He was sore all over today, inside and out, but he knew that Ike's diagnosis was probably correct—that he wasn't so badly hurt after all. If he had been, he could never have made those bitter miles back to camp.

"We'll keep traveling, same as ever," he said. "I'm not much good today, but you can load me into a wagon and forget about me."

"Apt tuh be kind of jolty," Ike warned.

"It was kind of jolty yesterday." Bellew forced a grin. "But that doesn't matter."

"Which way do we go?" Ike asked. There had been little talking the night before. "East or west?"

"East. It's impassable the other way, a few miles up."

"Well, I had a hunch all along we ought tuh swing to the east, anyway," Ike nodded cheerfully. "And if it's the only way, I sure must have been right."

They went ahead, Bellew riding in Jimmy's wagon, where she could turn and keep an eye on him, as she said. The snow hampered their progress, but the wheels of the big wagons turned as usual, since their normal pace was as slow as it could be and still show movement at all. There was no sign of Indians, nothing hostile—but there had been no sign the day before until that arrow of destruction had come whistling.

Luck, of sorts, continued to be with them. The valley wound along ahead, offering an easier and better route than they had had most of the time since leaving Hennessy's place, and there were no serious obstructions. For all that, it was like groping in the dark, with no good idea how far ahead Bang-Up might be, nor even if they were moving toward it or away from it.

And problems were on the increase now. Their own supplies were about used up, though there was plenty of food in the regular stocks in the wagons, and wild game in abundance. They faced no danger of starvation, nor did their horses, though the oats were gone now as well. But the sun-cured native grass, growing long, was almost as good fodder as oats, and though it was mostly under the snow now, the horses were not much troubled by that, pawing the snow aside and eating unconcernedly.

Such grazing took more time, however, the days were shorter, and the loss of the saddle pony was another handicap. But they were still rolling along—and Bellew was getting rapidly better.

"LOOKS like we'd have good travelin' for another day or so, at least," Long Ike reported cheerfully the second afternoon. "Had a good look up ahead, and it keeps right on the same way. Which is sure a break for us."

Well, they deserved a break. There had been plenty of tough luck on the trip, so far. Encouraged, Bellew turned over in the wagon and went to sleep.

He awoke to a murmur of voices which he couldn't place for the moment. Then he realized that the wagon was no longer moving, that darkness had fallen. He was still in the wagon, and camp had been made. Jimmy was nowhere around. It was Jules McCoy and Pecos Smith talking, from somewhere not far off. Probably sitting on the wagon tongue.

"That don't signify none, Pecos," McCoy was saying. "I'm willin' to admit yore contention that that buck Blaze killed was on a huntin' trip by himself. Otherwise we'd of had more trouble before this. But as tuh the chances of our gettin' through tuh Bang-Up without a lot more—well, I shore wouldn't give a plugged nickel for them—always supposin' I had a plugged nickel, which I ain't."

"Well, I'll concede that if the redskins in this section are on a rampage, like we heard, they might give us trouble, ordinary," Pecos agreed. "It's in the nature of the breed, I suppose. On the other hand, here's the way I look at it. These big bucks are a plumb lazy bunch, leavin' their squaws to do most of the work. And when it comes winter, this a way, with two-three heavy snows ploppin' down sudden, they like to get off in their tepees and take it easy. They'll have plenty grub on hand tuh last a spell, and they won't be roamin' much till the belly gets to pressin' them. So, way I look at it, and not knowin' that we're comin', they ain't apt tuh be out huntin' for us, and are apt tuh hear of our presence after we've arrived."

"That's a right comfortin' philosophy, Pecos, and I shore hate tuh shatter yore fond delusions," McCoy retorted. "And ordinary, I'd have tuh admit that yuh've got things sized up pretty well. But yuh're forgettin' one thing—Grizzly Brent."

"How do yuh mean, I'm forgettin' him? I'd like to, for I don't like that hombre any better than what you do, Jules, and that, from what I observed personal, wasn't much."

"If I liked him ten times as much as I do, I still couldn't hate him much worse," McCoy conceded frankly. "But he'll have reached the Indian camp before this, wherever they happen to be—and I'm bettin' he could go tuh their hangout as straight as a duck headin' south."

"Might be. Reckon he was a squaw man, all right. But what of that? He'll be ready tuh hole up for the winter, and glad of the chance. Or do yuh figger that his spite ag'in mebby you and Blaze—"

"That would have a bearin', but there's plenty without that," McCoy said grimly. "None of you boys seem to understand just the sort that Grizzly Brent is. Think back a minute, Pecos. Who was he runnin' this train for?"

"Why, Big John Carravan, I guess."

"Big John, yeah. And he's been workin' for years to ruin Big John, though Carravan, he's that trustful of his fellow-men that, once he'd licked Grizzly good in business, and Grizzly come to him and conceded he'd done same, and wanted to call it quits, Carravan believed him and give him another chance. But there ain't the shadow of a doubt in my mind that Grizzly took charge of this train and started out with it—intendin' to see that it never got through."

"YUH MEAN, he was tryin' tuh ruin Big John?"

"That's the biggest half of it. Along with other things, the loss of this outfit and all the money tied up in it could go a long way toward doing just that."

"Mebby so. But yuh're overlookin' the fact that Grizzly was doing his damnedest to get it through."

"Nope, I'm not overlookin' that. He aimed for it to get through—up to a certain point. And it won't make much diff'rence to him now that he ain't havin' the work of gettin' it through to that same point now. The results can work out just the same."

"Jules, sometimes yuh remind me of a diplomat, as they call them. I mean, the more yuh talk, the less yuh say."

"Then I'll talk plain. If there's an Indian attack made on this train, wipin' it out—that finishes Big John, don't it?"

"Reckon it'd have about that effect."

"And then, if Grizzly, actin' through somebody else, turned up in Bang-Up with a trainload of supplies, the people there, faced with starvation, 'd buy them at whatever price they had tuh pay, wouldn't they?"

"Sounds reasonable. But do you mean that Grizzly'd had this planned from the start—tuh work with the Indians, have them grab this train, then sell it himself?"

"Well, I've been bettin' my neck on it. And I still am."

"Blazes!" Pecos' voice rose in momentary excitement, then sank again. "Yuh're puttin' him right in the class of yellow-bellied renegades."

"Which is where he fits. How about that trapper's scalp?"

"Guess yuh're right. That's one thing I couldn't quite figger. I can see why he might take it—tuh make anybody think that Indians had done it. But why pack the damned thing with him?"

"Two reasons," McCoy retorted succinctly. "Which add up to one. He's an Indian, member of the tribe, and has doubtless tooken plenty hair before. Likewise, a fresh scalp would help tuh impress them redskins now."

Pecos Smith pondered, and seemed to agree. His voice was troubled.

"There's just one thing wrong in yore figgerin', way I see it, Jules. That scheme wouldn't be so nice if any of us ever told about it."

"We wouldn't tell. Grizzly had that figgered—still has. When an attack is made, he aims to have every last man of us wiped out. Includin' himself, of course. From then on he'll be an Indian—till he sees a good chance tuh turn up as a white man again for cookin' some more deviltry."

Listening, Bellew was a little staggered at the plan. And yet it seemed to fit the facts. Even Pecos was convinced, as his next words testified.

"And you think he'll still be aimin' to have that happen?"

"I don't think," McCoy retorted a little testily. "I know damn good and well it's what he's figgerin' on—more special now that Blaze and me have crossed him this way. He may figger on makin' one exception, now, in Jimmy's case—which wouldn't be any better for her. Let's go get some supper."

CHAPTER XX

Smoke Against the Sky

IT WAS like Jules McCoy that he had said nothing of his suspicions to anyone, and had confided now only in Pecos Smith because he felt that they were getting deep into dangerous territory, where, bfore many days, Grizzly could be expected to have a try at working his plan.

If McCoy was correct, it was a clever scheme, from Grizzly's standpoint—one which involved little enough risk, if properly carried out, with all the blame being foisted on the Indians. And if it worked, it meant that it would ruin his rival, Big John Carravan, and make him rich at the same time.

Only a man who knew Indians, who was a member of the tribe, with a strong hold on them, could hope to carry such a plan through to the last detail. But evidence had been piling up that Grizzly was such a man. The slaying of those who had brought the train almost to the doors of Bang-Up—that, too, would fit in with Grizzly's plan, saving their wages on that long trek, and making sure that no one was left to tell what had happened.

The more he pondered it, the more Bellew was convinced that McCoy must have hit the nail on the head. And now, as he had said, Grizzly would be more than ever anxious to carry it out.

His brow wrinkled in perplexity. In that case, why had Grizzly been so anxious to have him come along on this trip? He had been a rank tenderfoot at the beginning, and Grizzly's excuse, given then, that men were hard to find, had been far from the truth. It was hardly reasonable that Grizzly would seek him out, with the idea of having him massacred at the end. And Grizzly had known who he was, known that the law wanted him.

From the sounds outside, McCoy and Pecos were returning with their plates of supper. Pecos voiced a question.

"Yuh've figgered this all along then, Jules?"

"I had my suspicions, up tuh the time we found that skelp," McCoy agreed. "Then I knew."

"What's yore idea, now? It's plumb dangerous tuh stick with these wagons—but then, there's Big John and them folks in Bang-Up tuh consider, too."

"That's it, exactly," McCoy conceded. "And besides, Grizzly's between us and Bang-Up now. And if we did desert the wagons, he'd still aim to stop us from ever getting there. Kind of a personal matter with him now, way I look at it."

"Yeah. How about tellin' Blaze?"

"Wouldn't do no harm, once he gets on his feet ag'in."

"We won't wait for that." Bellew spoke softly, but his voice brought them to the wagon. McCoy exclaimed in shocked surprise.

"Dog-gone, I figgered yuh'd been moved to the tent," he said.

"I'm still here, and I heard what you boys said." Bellew replied. "If you don't mind, Jules, I'd like to shake your hand. I guess I was kind of mistaken about you—back there a ways."

McCOY colored a little, hesitated, and extended his hand diffidently.

"Shucks," he protested. "You had me sized plumb right, for a no-good heller, Blaze. That's what I am. Main reason I've stuck is, I hate like the devil tuh let Grizzly get away with anything—and I ain't been able tuh figger which way'd be best for keepin' my hair on my own head."

Bellew grinned a little. This had been a tough crew, to start with—but the common perils of this trail had welded them together. They were still a hard-bitter bunch, but he had an idea that he could depend on them now to the last man, for whatever came along. And the change had been such that Jimmy could be left among these wolves now and receive the respect that any good woman would be accorded, anywhere in the west. McCoy would fight for her as quickly as he had done before—but from entirely different motives.

Having a crew like that behind him, in times like these, was comforting. But the worst of the trip lay ahead. There would be little doubt of that now. They wouldn't be caught napping, but what chance would a handful of them have against the overwhelming numbers that Grizzly could probably bring against them?

Before, of course, if Grizzly had remained with them, they would have had no chance at all. He would have engineered that perfectly, to have them slain. It began to look as if he had had a motive in keeping the wagons strung out, one by one, instead of bunched in a circle at night.

Entirely aside from the consideration of Big John Carravan, the man they were working for, or the people in Bang-Up, who needed these supplies, there was, as McCoy had said, the fact that Grizzly and his red allies were between them and Bang-Up, and would be keeping a watch. To try and get through without the wagons would be just about as dangerous. And to turn back for Hell Roaring would be even worse. Winter would catch them long before they could make it, and so too, probably, would Grizzly.

It was Bellew's responsibility now. Bellew smiled thinly. And he was the man who had had everything done for him by others, up to a few weeks ago; a man who hadn't known the meaning of the word.

One factor was in their favor now. Following those first two snows, the weather had become more settled. It wasn't cold, but it was chilly enough so that the snow did not melt. In it, tracks were easy to see, and no marauders could approach close to the wagons without them knowing of it.

THE NEXT morning, Bellew took his place on his own wagon again, driving, swinging into the lead. That was his job. His body was still sore, and would be for some time, of

course, until those ribs healed. But, aside from bruises, it was apparent that he had suffered no serious injury, largely due, he judged, to the soft mud under the horse, which had cushioned him. And the snow cushioned a lot of the wagon jolts.

That evening, he called a council of war.

"Any of you have much idea of how far it might be to Bang-Up?" he asked.

"Looks to me, if we keep going this way, we ought to raise its smoke within a week—if we're going to at all," Long Ike declared, and the others nodded confirmation.

"In that case," Bellew said, "We can expect a showdown with Grizzly within four or five days—if at all."

As he had suspected, his bringing the subject into the open was no surprise to anyone. The word had got around as to what they probably faced.

"There's three things we can do," Bellew went on. "Keep on with the wagons, as we are doing. Or desert them and try to get through, then send back for them—which would probably mean a fight for them, if we made it in the first place, with the good chance that we'd find them destroyed. Or send someone ahead to try and get help, the rest of us keeping on. If we try that, and the messenger is seen—well, it wouldn't help us, just mean trouble that much sooner, and one less to help fight. Also, his trail would almost certainly be picked up long before he could get there."

He saw by their faces that they agreed with him. It was not a promising situation, and they all knew it. But they had what it takes.

"We'll stick together, and with the wagons," he summed up. "And keep them close together from now on."

That seemed a good enough plan as he sought his blankets. By day, clear as it had been, they could see for a long distance in the valley, and they were keeping a sharp watch by night. During the next day the plan still seemed logical enough, while they kept rolling steadily along, with less trouble than they had encountered anywhere since the journey began. Long Ike was positive now.

"Looks to me like we're on the right road," he said. "Uh course, no wagons have ever come up from the south before. Bang-Up's got such supplies as it did from the northeast. But I'm pretty sure we're headin' straight for it, from all the signs."

That was encouraging. But the next day it was snowing again, heavily, and Bellew had a moment of doubt.

In a storm like this he could send someone ahead to try and reach Bang-Up and bring back help. Trails would be covered by the storm; the chances should be good. Also, they could see for only a few yards today. Which meant that enemies could pounce on them as they moved, before they knew of it.

But he decided again against dividing their forces. Even if a man did get through, they would probably be attacked before help could get back to them. He had a hunch that, with this storm, trouble would come before another sunrise.

Here too, the nature of the valley, which had been mostly wide and open and reasonably level, for days, was changing. The hills at the sides were closing in on them, growing higher and more troublesome. Traveling in the storm was going it blind, and might lead them into some sort of a trap, but they had to keep moving. If the snow got much deeper, and the horses couldn't get to grass, then they couldn't move these heavy wagons through it. Showdown was approaching from more than one direction now.

An hour before normal sundown, the storm stopped as abruptly as the jerking aside of a curtain. One moment the air had been choked with snow, as it had all day. The next, it was possible to see for miles.

And here, from the looks, was just about the end of their easy traveling. Up ahead were more hills and wooded slopes, spreading pretty much across the whole valley floor. A place where any sort of a road would be hard to find. And up ahead was something else—smoke.

It arose in a thin whitish streamer, a few miles up ahead. And the next instant it was gone, blotted away as abruptly as the storm itself had ended.

CHAPTER XXI

Ambush

WATCHING it, Bellew blinked and looked again. It was like a conjuring trick, there one moment, gone the next. He looked around to see if any of the others had seen it. His wagon was in the lead, which had given him an advantage, but any of the others could have seen it, if they had been looking at the right moment and in the right place.

But apparently no one else had observed it, for if they had done so, it would have been something to be reported. He stopped his own wagon, and waited for the others to come up.

"I saw smoke up ahead," he announced bluntly. "Maybe three miles. It was there—then gone that quick!"

From their startled glances, he saw that they understood, and that none of them had seen it.

"Sure yore eyes wasn't playin' yuh tricks, Blaze?" McCoy asked cautiously.

"I've got pretty good eyes. And this doesn't look like a time to take chances."

"Nope, yuh're right there. Looks tuh me like there'd be Indians camped up there, waitin' for us tuh hole up for the night, and keepin' comfortable while they did it. When the snow stopped so sudden, they scattered their fire in a hurry."

That was the way Bellew had figured it. Which seemed proof enough that a war party was waiting for them, knowing their movements as well as they did themselves. If the storm had held—well, it might have been worse, though that, too, was problematical. They knew now that what they had been expecting was at hand, for tonight.

Not more than a quarter of a mile ahead the valley came together, the hills closing in from both sides with grim abruptness. From being half a mile wide, as it was here, the shouldering hills left an opening not more than a hundred feet across. Up in there would be a perfect place for an ambush.

McCoy was staring ahead thoughtfully. Now he turned.

"I know where we're at, now," he pronounced. "I was in the Bang-Up country a few years ago, before there was any camp there. Might have found that gold and been rich by now, if I'd been smart—which I wasn't. Anyway, I come down this way about this far—I remember that hill off there, that looks kind of like an old Spanish castle. I come that far, then turned back."

"How far to Bang-Up?" Bellew asked.

"Three or four days, the way we travel. Not a good road, but a passable trail, I reckon—if we can keep on going. What I was going tuh say is, if there's redskins up ahead, and it looks more'n likely, we'd better camp right here, in the open. Go through that gate in the hills there and we'll be right in a pocket. It's not more'n a hundred yards wide, inside there, for about a quarter of a mile, and steep hills on both sides. Then it narrows again, sharper'n it does here. After that it gets some wider again, but there's plenty of places for ambush for the next ten miles or so. Here they can't sneak up on us close, anyway."

BELLEW had been wondering about that. He looked ahead, studying the hills. They looked steep, but there was plenty of wood growing on the tops, which were a couple of hundred feet above the valley level here, and reasonably flat. He made his decision.

"We'll go on, inside that pocket you just described, and camp there," he said. "Ought to be a nice, protected camping place, hadn't it, McCoy?"

McCoy looked at him in amazement.

"Sure, it's nice an' protected—a right nice place where we won't have a chance," he said. "They can sneak

in from both ends, bottle us up, and kill us as they please."

"Sounds good," Bellew agreed. He climbed, still a little painfully, back on his own wagon. "Let's get to rolling."

The others stared at him for a moment, undecided; then a slow grin creased Ike's leathery cheeks.

"Sure," he said. "Let's get to rolling."

From the way they watched him, Bellew knew that they still didn't understand what he had in mind, once they arrived at the camping place. It was as McCoy had described it. Here between the hills there was a little stream running darkly at one side; the whole place, mostly meadow land and barren of trees, was darkly gloomy in the settling dusk.

But there had been beaver dams along the creek at some time in the past, dams later washed out by high water. Some of that wood had been swept into piles of drift by floor waters, off at the sides. The hills on each side arose sharply, as McCoy had said. It had all the look of a death-trap for anyone caught inside.

But that was something that might work both ways.

"Wagons in a circle, and make camp as usual," Bellew instructed. "But keep the horses in the circle tonight. I figure if we have company, that they won't come calling much before midnight. That's their usual custom, isn't it?"

"Usual, they wait till close tuh dawn," Pecos admitted. "If Grizzly's directin' 'em, he'll likely strike around midnight, figgerin' we'll be well asleep by then."

Bellew nodded but made no comment. Likely there would be a scout watching them, who would report back on their position, as soon as it was seen that they were settled. By the time supper was eaten, it had grown dark. Bellew stood up.

"Get the horses back outside, and out of the way," he instructed quietly. "We'll leave the wagons here, for they won't want to destroy them anyway. Come on, now. If we're to have company, we want to be ready to give them a warm welcome."

They were eager, as they began to see his plan. Taking some of the stacked piles of dry brush, they placed it in huge piles near the upper and lower ends of the pocket, though not in a direct path from either direction. Bellew, looking at them, nodded approval.

"Pecos, I'm picking you to stay here at the upper end, and fire this pile when the time comes," he said. "And, Van, you do the same at the other end. I'd take one myself, if I could climb a little faster. Keep down low till I give the signal. As soon as you have them going, get up on top with the rest of us in a hurry."

THE REST of them went to the top of the hills—two on each side at each end, above the narrow necks to the pocket. There they gathered more wood, in big piles, ready to be shoved over to tumble almost directly onto the piles below, once they should commence to die down. All of this took a couple of hours, working as quietly as they could, but it was still early, so far as the hour was concerned, when preparations were complete. All that remained was to wrap themselves in blankets, guns ready, and wait. The night was black, with clouds making a low haze across the sky—a perfect night for ambushment. And everything was set to give a surprise to any who might try it.

The waiting was the hardest. Sleep was out of the question, and with nerves strung to a taut pitch, it would have been impossible in any case. Crouched, two of them on each side at the upper end, a similar disposition of forces down below, they controlled the only exits from the pocket, exits which would be lit bright as day by the flaring bonfires, once they were touched off. Shooting down from above, they could make it a terrible trap—if their enemies walked into it.

Everything depended on that. If the attackers sensed the trap and refused to come in, and their case, either tonight or in the next day or so, would become well-nigh hopeless. But with the thick darkness to aid them, and the confidence in their own strat-

egy which the Indians must feel, Bellew was hopeful.

The breathless quality of the night made the flesh creep. Generally, at night, there was a myriad of sounds to which, through long association, Bellew had come to pay little attention. Tonight there were none of the usual noises. Proof enough that their fears were not fancies.

Jimmy Carran crouched close beside Bellew, so close that he could reach out and touch her, though he could scarcely see her. She seemed as calm as anyone there tonight, and her presence was oddly comforting. Across from them, barely a stone's-throw away, were McCoy and Chatterton, with Pecos down below, waiting to fire the brush. Van Kyle, Long Ike, Arizona, who had never given any other name, the cook and the horse wrangler were at the lower end.

"They're coming." It was Jimmy's whisper, scarcely audible, though her face was close to his. For a moment, Bellew felt her breath on his cheek, her breathing a little hurried; then he heard it, too—a barely audible rustle as men moved below them, slipping stealthily along.

How long that endured was hard to tell, for minutes seemed hours now. Then, all at once, fierce and wild as the wilderness itself, a war-whoop rang out from the middle of the pocket—a savage, demoralizing yell that seemed to come from half a hundred throats, to rise and split and rise again in a horrible screech. Rifles flashed wickedly, showing like little red stabs of knife-blades being wielded.

Then, as if an answer, there was a tiny tongue of flame below them. It leaped all at once to a mounting column of crimson, flinging wide banners of garish light from wall to wall, while at the far end of the pocket another fire was getting a good grip on the tinder-like boughs and heartier wood, dancing back blood-red from the darkly flowing creek.

As the flames mounted, the war-whoops suddenly gurgled away to silence, giving way to yelps of surprise and dismay as the wagons were found empty. Then the light had spread until the whole length and breadth of the pocket was aglow, reflected back by the snow, with the wagons silhouetted darkly against it—and a horde of suddenly panic-stricken warriors outlined, indecisive and afraid.

"Let them have it," Bellew ordered, and his own gun thundered in signal.

CHAPTER XXII

Woman of the Forest

THERE were not so many warriors there as he had supposed at first, when their war-whoops had made the night hideous. It was like a coyote serenade that way. One throat could seem like a dozen. Probably there were two dozen picked warriors, brought there to make a swift surprise attack and calculating to win without much opposition.

Now the surprise was reversed, and it left the trapped men in a terrible predicament. Two or three of them had guns, and the rest packed bows and tomahawks, but they were down in the pocket, pitilessly exposed by the firelight, and the men of the wagon train were above them, safely sheltered in darkness.

It was grim business, shooting at them down there, while they could not shoot back. Bellew felt a little sick as he saw the effects of that first volley among them. These were men of the frontier, and at least half of them had fought Indians before. Their job was to pick individual targets, and they knew just how to do it.

Only the fact that these painted devils had swarmed in here with the intention of wiping them out without a chance steeled Bellew. Now the tables were turned, and the thing had to be done if they were ever to reach Bang-Up, where the lives of other men, and women as well, were at stake.

For a few moments, as the teamsters began shooting, the men trapped below were utterly panic-stricken. Some ran wildly, without plan. A few raced for the exits at either end, to be mowed down before they could reach them. Two or three had the presence of mind to take cover behind

the wagons which they had come to attack, but even these were poor shelters now, under fire from above on four sides.

Already the dry wood, which had flared up swiftly, was beginning to burn down; the high dancing lights flickered and retreated before the menacing dark. But now the piles on the banks above were tumbled onto the fires below, and those who had risked a dash as the shadows lengthened were caught in a fresh glare and burst of gun-fire.

"Reckon we're not wastin' much lead," McCoy's voice came coolly across to them. "Watch me show that feller how tuh run!"

His gun cracked again, and the runner leaped convulsively and fell sprawling. It was hell down below—the same sort of thing that these trapped men had planned for them. Jimmy's face was white in the reflected fire-glow. Then Bellew tensed suddenly, working frantically to slip fresh shells into an empty gun.

For one man had dashed out suddenly from behind the wagons, weaving and dodging as he ran to escape, taking advantage of the fact that once again the fires were dying. And that man was Grizzly.

Two or three shots were fired at him, but he seemed to have caught most of them with empty guns. He gained the entrance-way, plunged into the dark which waited there like a solid thing, and was gone. One or two others had escaped as well.

"Reckon we taught them a lesson, anyway," Chatterton growled. "The bloody murderers!"

Most of the others felt like Chatterton, now that it was all over—exultant at the success of Bellew's plan, at the tremendous slaughter they had inflicted, and without cost to themselves. But Jimmy's face was still white, and she had little to say. Long Ike was the same, and Bellew knew how they felt.

THEY had had no choice. It had been one side or the other. That might be a justification, but he felt no elation. Having seen how these men, who had possessed this land through the centuries, were being evicted from it, and the methods used, he didn't blame them for fighting to protect it. Though tonight's battle was a little different.

Different, in the sense that they had been dupes, playing the game of Grizzly Brent. No matter what happened, they had stood to lose, though they didn't know it. And Grizzly had escaped.

Which meant that there would be another clash before they could hope to reach Bang-Up. Grizzly would have no trouble in finding more recruits to take the place of those who had fallen. They had gained another day or so, tonight—but next time they couldn't hope for such luck.

"Bring the horses in and hitch up," Bellew instructed. "We'll pull on for another mile before we camp."

"Good idea," Pecos agreed grimly. "I wouldn't sleep so good in here tonight."

There was no danger of another attack tonight. Not after such a devastating victory as that had been. But guards were posted as usual, and snores coming from some of the other wagons quickly betokened that to most of these men this was just another incident in the succession of days.

His own blankets were spread under the wagon again, with Jimmy's tent close at hand. Jimmy. It was a funny time and place to think of such things, but he loved Jimmy. The idea that had seemed ridiculous a few weeks before didn't seem so at all now. If they got out of this alive, he'd marry her—and he didn't even know her real name.

He sat up in his blankets a moment, his jaw tightening with memory. He'd forgotten, for the moment, that back in Ridleyburg he was wanted for murder, with a sentence hanging over his head. Somehow, that all seemed very far away, up here.

And Grizzly and the Indians would be out for revenge. Doubly so now. They had to be passed if he was ever to show his face again, too. Life had a way of weaving complicated patterns.

THE GOING, the next day, was considerably harder than it had been for some time. Here in the hilly country again, even following the valley became one of the toughest jobs they had had on the entire trip. McCoy had been through this country once, but that had been on horseback, without a thought of roads, and over bare ground. Snow had a way of changing things. Yet somehow they were still finding a road, still pushing ahead.

Bellew was doing a lot of thinking about the next attack. He had no more tricks up his sleeve, and the next time it would probably come in such force that they would be virtually helpless. They might make a good fight of it, in the best tradition of the frontier—and with the same ending as many another such battle had had.

Abruptly it turned colder. Streams, which had been shrouded with snow to their edges but had preserved a dark track of water by way of contrast, suddenly showed a film of ice over all the still pools. Breaths came frostily; the wagons creaked and groaned more loudly. Horses were beginning to show the long strain, growing leaner, moving, if anything, more slowly than before.

Bellew found himself in close sympathy with them. At the start of the journey, they had been fractious enough when they could manage it, resisting the harness, fighting the bit when it was forced into their mouths, showing their independence in a score of little ways, even while they went ahead and did their work well enough. Now most of that surface froth was gone. They still went through the motions of resistance, but that was all. They were growing tired, too.

Bellew paused to rub the big leader between the eyes, to fondle his ears a moment, after he had slung the harness down and given the horses partial freedom for the evening. The camp at the pocket was two days behind them now, and Bang-Up, if it wasn't a mythical spot entirely, couldn't be more than two or three days ahead. And by that same token, trouble couldn't be far off. It might be a good idea to try and get word through, to send for help—

Yet there was no outward sign of trouble as yet. This was a good place to camp, under the circumstances. The valley had widened again, and for a space a quarter of a mile in either direction the valley was open, with fairly flat ground. The wagons were in a circle near the middle of this open spot. Even on a dark night, guards could detect anyone who might approach across the snowfield, and the element of surprise at least would be pretty well minimized.

The horses cared for, Bellew made his periodic inspection and check-up of everything. It was still a few minutes to dusk, and the air, while sharp, was not raw. Things looked all right, but he kept going, spurred by a vague uneasiness which he could not quite define. He wanted, he admitted to himself, to find Jimmy, with whom he'd barely had a chance to speak all day.

THEN he saw her, off a couple of hundred yards. She was standing staring toward a little patch of trees, and there was a look on her face blended of eagerness, surprise and disbelief. Even as he saw her, she took a hesitant step or so forward, paused, then broke suddenly into a run.

Startled, and more than a little bewildered by her actions, Bellew followed. This was utterly unlike Jimmy, usually as cautious as any of them in this country. He couldn't understand it of her. It would take something strange and unusual to surprise her to such an unconsidered action.

And then, for just an instant, as he came to higher ground, where Jimmy had been, he saw another woman, up ahead, by the trees—a white woman.

It was just a glimpse, the way he had seen the smoke the other day. Something not quite believable, yet he knew that his eyes were not playing him tricks. A white woman—and Jimmy was going to meet her.

By now, Jimmy had reached the

trees and was out of sight. For an instant longer Bellew hesitated, debating whether to go after her or to summon the others. It had the look of a trap to him. While he hesitated, he heard a choked, smothered cry—a cry that could come only from Jimmy's lips.

Then, before he could move, something rose out of a drift of snow, almost at his feet. Arms had grasped his legs, throwing him down headlong, and were closing about him, and fingers held his throat in a throttling grip which choked his desperate attempt to yell to a rasping gurgle.

CHAPTER XXIII

Out of the Past

BELLEW'S predominant emotion was disgust. Disgust with himself, for walking with open eyes into a trap and falling such an easy victim. He opened his mouth and strove again to yell, but found it full of snow. By the time he could get rid of that, a blanket was wrapped around him and over his mouth as well. Attempts to fight were like the last kicking of a headless chicken. He had been too completely smothered from the start, by three or four men who had burrowed into that drift.

If he had used his eyes, of course, for anything except Jimmy, he should have seen some signs. And Jimmy had been rendered incautious by that woman whom she had seen, over at the edge of the forest. A white woman. The thing clicked in Bellew's mind. Jimmy's mother, of course. Hadn't Jimmy come to this country to look for her?

It was too much for him to figure out, but it had happened. Swathed and wrapped like a mummy, unable to do more than wiggle his fingers or toes, he was being dragged along back through the snow; then, as the motion told him, for he couldn't see a thing, hoisted between two men and carried like a log for a short distance.

Abruptly they dropped him, unwinding the blanket, and when he could see again, he found himself staring into a circle of dark, grim faces, and a couple of drawn bows and arrows, held not far from his face.

"Not make any noise," one of the Indians cautioned. "Or die quick!"

Remembering that arrow which had killed his horse, Bellew nodded. He was unwound, allowed to get to his feet, and his hands promptly jerked behind him and tied with a rawhide thong. Then, with three or four of them around him, he was prodded into motion.

He had seen six or eight Indians here, but there was no other sound to indicate what they might be about. And no sign of Jimmy or the white woman. This surprise, Bellew reflected wryly, had been as complete and well timed as the one he had worked on them the other night.

They were marching steadily now, heading north and a little to the west, taking a route that was anything but easy as it wound in the hills, up and down and around, with brush whipping back from the man ahead and slapping at him, while another man close behind prodded him urgently if he lagged. Darkness was already closing down.

Bellew considered the possibility of a sudden side leap in the darkness and an attempt at escape, and discarded it. The chances were strong that he'd merely take a bad tumble and be caught again before he could get to his feet, and even if he got a start, they'd almost certainly overtake him within a matter of minutes, handicapped as he was.

The fact that he was alive, when they might as easily have killed him, was proof enough that Grizzly was behind the thing. Whether that was encouraging or not, he couldn't quite decide. It was more than possible that Grizzly, being only a savage with a white skin, would figure like the rest of them—that captives were something to have fun with for a while before you killed them.

And this was the result of his leadership—to get almost within sight of Bang-Up and then have Grizzly take control. It worse than nullified all that had gone between.

STRANGELY enough, he still wasn't frightened, nor particularly discouraged. Since that moment of panic in the hotel at Hell Roaring, when he had discovered the loss of his money, he had found a new life, and he knew now that it had gone a long way toward making a new man of him, giving him a new understanding. On his first night in Ridleyburg, prior to what had happened to Jake Kilrain, he had watched a professional gambler for a couple of hours, studying the cards he held; and, as he realized now, because he had been a tenderfoot, the gambler had permitted this without resentment.

For most of those two hours, while the stakes grew higher, it had looked to Bellew as though the gambler would have no chance of winning. Probably he had felt the same way, as, with each new draw, he continued to get poor cards. Yet he had kept on, playing them close, without a trace of what he might be thinking showing in his face. And finally, at the last, he had gotten one good card. Just one. But he had played that one cleverly enough to win.

Then, for the first time, he had turned to the watching, now marveling Bellew, and his face had relaxed into a brief, friendly grin.

"A game's never won, nor lost, till the last card is played," he had remarked briefly, and raked in his winnings.

The memory of that game was with Bellew now. And he knew that he had adopted the gambler's philosophy as his own. He had a stake in this game, but no cards. But there was no telling when he might get one.

It was a couple of hours later when they reached the Indian camp. For most of that time he had stumbled along through a blackness so thick that it was difficult to follow the back of the man who went ahead, to keep his feet in the broken trail. The clouds hung unbroken, allowing no gleam of moon or stars to come through. So it was almost a relief to come out into a little secluded valley, surrounded by hills, with woods close at hand, and fires burning here and there.

One look told him that it was a considerable village. There were skin tepees, dozens of them, and a sizable population, men, women and children. They stared at him, with faces wiped as clean of expression as the gambler's had been. He had been steeling himself for active hostility, but there was none of that.

THERE had been no sign of Jimmy during that long hike. Which was worrying him considerably more than his own plight.

He was thrust into a tepee and left alone. Faint light filtered through the skins from a fire not far off, so that he could make out a pile of skins in one corner. Otherwise the place was empty.

The rawhide was cutting unpleasantly into his wrists, and all attempts to loosen it as he had walked seemed only to have drawn it tighter. He looked out, to discover a guard in front of the tepee, and another at the rear.

It was a long night. His hands bothered him, and sleep was difficult, though he dozed at times. Then he awoke to find sunshine beating in on his face through the open flap, and Grizzly's whiskered visage grinning down at him. There was nothing friendly nor reassuring in the grin. He had seen such a look on the face of a cat, playing with a mouse before it proceeded to eat it.

"Well, well, if it isn't Blaze," Grizzly said jovially. "Don't tell me you aren't glad to see me, Blaze."

Bellew sat up with an effort, his wrists and arms throbbing painfully. Both arms seemed numbed almost to his shoulders, and he was stiff as a log.

"No, I won't tell you that, Grizzly," he agreed. "Even you're better to look at than nothing.

Grizzly's grin widened.

"Well, that's the proper spirit," he said. "Arms troubling you, eh?" He stepped forward, a knife gleamed, and the cord was slashed. "You might as well have your arms free today, since you won't have a chance to get out of this camp during the daytime, even if you are loose. Limber your-

self up, and I'll send you in some breakfast."

He nodded and went out again. Here was proof enough that he was the real boss here, that McCoy had been right in his summing up of the situation. It was a grim business.

The next half-hour was an unpleasant one, as he tried to get back the use of his arms, but finally they became limbs again, rather than cramped sticks of wood. A look outside showed that the day was warmer, the clouds all gone. There was only one guard on duty now, but this tepee was near the middle of the camp, and Indians were moving about on all sides. As Grizzly had said, any attempt at escape during daylight would be utterly out of the question.

His breakfast came. Another hour dragged by. Then Grizzly appeared again.

"Feeling better, eh?" he asked. "Well, come along. You'll be wanting to see Jimmy, I suppose."

Bellew clamped his jaws tight. All of Grizzly's old arrogance had returned, and it was doubly irritating when he spoke in that tone of voice. He was like a Roman conqueror, exhibiting his captives. But for the moment, he held all the cards in his own hand. Bellew followed him to a large tepee, and entered, with Grizzly at his heels. Then he stopped short.

Jimmy turned, her face whitening at sight of him, and Bellew guessed that, up to then, she had not learned of his being a captive as well. Beside her was a woman who might almost have been Jimmy's elder sister, and not so much older, at that.

For a moment they stood, no one speaking. Then Jimmy took a step toward him.

"Oh, Blaze—I'm sorry."

He managed to grin at her.

"It's all right, Jimmy. I'm fine. And you?"

"I'm fine, too," she agreed. "Blaze, this is my mother. She was up here—just as I'd suspected was the case."

Bellew turned to her. She smiled at him, with a warm, understanding light in her eyes, and Bellew knew that Jimmy must have told her about him already. She held out her hand to him, man-fashion.

"I'm very glad to know you, Blaze," she said. "Though I'm sorry to see you here." Her gaze, lifted to Grizzly's, was suddenly cold. "It's all a part of your scheme, I suppose?"

Grizzly nodded, unabashed.

"All a part of it," he agreed. "I generally work things out the way I plan them. You should all be learning that by now."

"You've been lucky," she flared. "Most people haven't known what a sneaking sort you are. They're finding out, and when they meet you on your own ground, you won't have a chance."

Grizzly's face reddened a little.

"It might pay you to keep a civil tongue in your head," he growled.

"I'm not afraid of you, Grizzly Brent! Even if you did murder Jake Kilrain, before he could get word out about me!"

CHAPTER XXIV

Journey's End

GRIZZLY'S somber face was going a little darker still, if that were possible. Bellew stared from one to the other, amazed. Jake Kilrain! That was the man he was accused of having murdered, down at Ridleyburg. Here was something in which he was definitely interested.

"What the blazes do yuh mean?" Grizzly growled.

"Just what I say!" Jimmy's mother retorted pointedly. "I asked Jake to get word out about me—and I've learned that he was killed, down at Ridleyburg, when he was trying to tell somebody who would know about things, that his mouth was stopped before he could do it. And you were there! You murdered him to keep him still!"

For a moment, Grizzly stared. His eyes, reddened again now, swung from her to Bellew, and his head moved a little, like that of his four-footed namesake when indecisive and about to charge. Then he shrugged.

"Yeah, I killed him," he admitted,

and a new chill seemed to creep into the tepee with his words, proving how completely master of the situation he felt. "I don't like to have my plans upset—and I generally see to it that they aren't. What are you going to do about it?"

He allowed his gaze to swing to Bellew's now, vindictive triumph in it.

"So far as the killin' of Jake is concerned," he added, "Bellew here is the man the law says is guilty."

Bellew saw the sudden terror in the eyes of both Jimmy and her mother. He remembered that he had told Jimmy that he was wanted for murder, a killing which he hadn't done, but he had not gone into detail nor mentioned the name of Jake Kilrain. So this was news to both of them—almost as much as it was to him.

He had been drunk, that night—so drunk that the whole affair had been hazy in his mind. He hadn't heard the name of Kilrain till it was mentioned to him the next day. And he had been unable to convince anyone, even himself, that he was innocent.

For all that he had known, the thing might have happened. It didn't seem possible, but still he might have pulled a gun in a drunken rage and shot. They had claimed that it was a deliberate thing, and his own haziness had made it impossible to combat them effectively.

A lot of things were suddenly becoming clear. Jake Kilrain had been killed, for a deliberate purpose. And Grizzly Brent had done it. He had managed, either cleverly or with the connivance of others who had been there—and the latter seemed more probable—to pick on a drunken tenderfoot who was in no shape to resist, to foist the guilt of that killing on him.

That, in part, explained Grizzly's interest in him since then, and his knowing him when he had appeared in Hell Roaring; also his knowledge of why the law wanted Bellew. Had his offer of a chance to get out of that country been motivated by a desire partially to right the wrong he had done? It didn't fit in with Grizzly's character.

GRIZZLY'S next words proved it. "You can go right ahead and call me all the names you like," he said, and there was a thin smile on his lips now. "I'm used to them, and they won't hurt any—or change my plans a bit. I'm admittin' this, since none of you are going to have any chance to spread it around where it'd do any harm. As for you, Blaze, I didn't know, that night, that you were any special class of tenderfoot. When I found out later that you were rich, with relatives who had plenty of dough—well, it was too good a chance to miss. I've got you up here now, right where I want you—and when I send word out to that uncle of yourn, who bought yore way out of that jail at Ridleyburg—well, I have a pretty good idea that he'll pay quite a bit more for you."

That made it clear enough. He would be kept alive until ransom had been collected, but naturally he would never be turned over in payment for the money. He knew too much. Grizzly figured on getting the money, then letting the Indians have their revenge on him.

But the shrewdness of Jimmy's mother, in guessing at what had happened and charging Grizzly with it, had disconcerted him for the moment. Whatever plan he may have had in mind in bringing the three of them together, he had changed it now. He signaled for two Indians to take Bellew back to his own tepee, pausing only for a general word of warning.

"I'm treatin' you all as good as I can manage—and you'd better not try to act up any. Otherwise things 'll be a lot tougher."

He hurried away on some new idea of his own, and Bellew was taken back to his own prison. Inside, he was left untied, but with the camp as busy as it was and an armed guard outside, escape was out of the question, at least until night. And by then, of course, further precautions would be taken.

But it was comforting to know that he was to be kept alive, probably for

the rest of the winter at least. Godfrey Bellew was too shrewd a business man to pay money for the release of his nephew unless he was furnished proof that he was alive, and Grizzly knew it. After that, he could find a way to dispose of him, but much might happen in the meantime.

Of more immediate concern was the plight of Jimmy and her mother, and of the wagon train. What had happened to them, after he had been captured? Indians had been there in force, and it seemed more than probable that something must have happened to his crew by now. Taken by surprise as he had been, with their original ten reduced to eight, it wouldn't have been hard.

And the grim factor here was that none of them were worth anything to Grizzly alive, as he was.

As for Jimmy—the thing which he had tried hardest to prevent had happened now. She was in Grizzly's power. So, too, was her mother.

THE DAY wore along. Outside, it was warm enough so that the snow was melting to some extent, and there seemed to be an air of excitement and expectancy throughout the whole camp. Bellew could make a pretty good guess why. Probably the jerk-line string had been captured, and the wagons would be coming.

Efforts to engage his guard in conversation were unavailing during the morning. His only replies were grunts. But when the guard was changed, the results were a little better. This man could talk some English, and seemed not unwilling to do so. But he cleverly parried any questions which would tell Bellew anything he wanted to know, until, quite by chance, he dropped a remark on his own account which answered a vital question.

Bang-Up was off to the northwest—not more than fifteen miles from this village.

So they had almost gotten through, as he had believed. The mockery of it, to come that close to success and then fail, was bitter. But it suggested a new train of thought. Were these Indians really considered hostile, in Bang-Up, or not?

The camp was probably a pretty good-sized one, and it was more than doubtful if the Indians would consider making an attack on it, however hostile they might feel. On the other hand, if they were hostile, then the men in Bang-Up must know where they were camped, and it seemed a bit strange that they would leave them in peace so close to town. That would be dangerous for hunters or stragglers around the outskirts. And a bunch of determined white men, well armed, could clean out the camp, if they considered it a menace.

It was more than probable that the talk of hostilities was a creation of Grizzly, for purposes of his own. True, they had been warlike enough, on meeting the wagon train. But Grizzly was in command here, in the final analysis, and every man who had come north with the jerk-line teams was to be killed before Bang-Up knew anything about it. After that—

The thought brought him to his feet with clenched fists. After that, when Grizzly turned over the wagons and supplies to the miners, at outrageous prices, making out that he was the lone survivor of that murderous attack—then he would be doing something that the Indians, quite plainly, had not foreseen and didn't suspect—playing his old game of cross and double-cross on them.

For that was the only way he could work his scheme. And when the miners learned of the massacre, then they would know that these Indians had done it. And they could be counted on to take characteristic and terrible action against these red men, who were only doing as they were told.

That, of course, was something that they had never thought about. But the more he studied it, the more certain he became that Grizzly had some such scheme in mind. It would be the last act necessary to make him solid with the whites again, so that he would no longer have to skulk as a renegade. He could easily have Bel-

lew, Jimmy and her mother safely hidden away somewhere until later.

Bellew considered the notion of broaching his suspicions to his guard, and decided against it. Grizzly's hold here was too strong. The Indian wouldn't believe him. He would tell Grizzly, and that would spoil everything.

The afternoon was waning. There was a stir of excitement in camp now. Bellew looked out, his jaw set a little more grimly.

The jerk-line string was coming in, wagon after wagon, straight into the middle of the camp. The horses plodded as patiently as ever, hardly mindful of the fact that new, red-skinned drivers sat upon the wagons and jerked the lines. Grizzly himself drove the lead wagon, his old team.

And the original drivers were being unloaded off the wagons now, hands bound behind them. Bellew counted them all. They had been taken, as he had been, alive. But their treatment now was vastly different. A wave of savage excitement had swept through the camp at their appearance, howls and yells and imprecations. With their feet freed, swaying woodenly as they tried to walk, the captives were hustled along, jeered, slapped, spat upon, insulted. They had been brought here, alive, that they might furnish a show, and, having furnished it, die.

CHAPTER XXV

Secret Cargo

THE sight turned him a little sick. He had heard tales of the ferocity of Indians on such occasions, and it looked as if they had not been exaggerated. But he didn't blame the red men, particularly. They were puppets, and Grizzly was pulling the strings. This was one string by which he maintained his hold over them, and accomplished his own purpose at the same time. Their turn would come later.

So far as Bellew had been able to observe during the day, these Indians were as quiet and mannerly among themselves, as kind and decent as any white people. What was set to happen tonight was not their fault. Unlettered, wildly emotional, they could be stirred to a savage pitch—and already the stirring had begun.

Evidently a big show was to be put on. A powwow was beginning now, with most of the tribe gathering for it, and war drums beating. Whatever might take place, off here in the hills tonight, this far from Bang-Up, would not be heard there. If any of it should be heard—well, that would fit in well enough with Grizzly's later purpose, and still there could be no interference tonight.

It looked as if the usual custom would be followed—war drums beating, wild dances, inflammatory speeches, until they had worked themselves up to the proper pitch. Once that was done, there would be the running of the gauntlet, and other diversions nearly as bestial as white men could devise for similar occasions, with death coming as a welcome relief at the last.

Dusk was already falling, but with a huge leaping bonfire for light, and the sky still clear and star-studded, it was easy to see things, a great contrast to the night before. The captives had been tied to convenient trees, where they still had to endure abuse and mild torture. And Bellew's tent was placed where he could see it all.

Then a couple of grim-faced warriors entered, with Grizzly at their heels. Grizzly was jovial enough now.

"Well, we got the wagons through, and that was some trail, if yuh ask me," he nodded. "Right now, I guess you'll have to be tied up again, Blaze. The boys don't want to miss any of the fun, by having to stay here and watch you."

He nodded, went back to his own wagon, jerked the line, and drove forward again. The horses wound past the tepee, then came to a stop with the big wagon itself just outside. The horses were unharnessed and led away. While this was being done, the two braves had been tying Bellew.

They did their work with grim thoroughness. His hands were

jerked behind his back again, tied with a fresh strand of rawhide, as tightly as on the night before; then his feet were tied as well. To make assurance doubly sure, a stake was driven into the ground, a thong tied to it, and run to his wrists behind.

This enabled him, by rolling, to move about inside the tepee, but not to get away from it. It was cramped and painful, but effective.

As soon as that was done, and the knots tested, they left him. The main show was a hundred yards away, and everybody was gathering there now—men, women and children. He could watch through the partly opened flap, if he wanted to.

For a few minutes, desperately, Bellew writhed and twisted. He could see Long Ike, his face bloody where he had been struck by whips, but standing with head up, eying his tormentors without flinching. Bellew wondered if he could do as well under similar circumstances. There was McCoy, and Pecos Smith, in no better state, but taking it just as well. He couldn't see the others very clearly, but they were there.

And he, in a way, was responsible for it. He had been named their leader. He should have sensed that something was wrong when he glimpsed a strange white woman at the edge of the brush, and given a quick warning, instead of running after Jimmy. Though, he realized with grim clarity, in that case they would probably all be dead by now.

The shadowy bulk of the big wagon loomed up at the side, its canvas tarp faded and torn, the big wheels looking as if they had been through a battle on those unending miles of trail. He had driven that wagon himself for a couple of days, since Grizzly had left. Had—

HE LAY utterly still for a moment, thinking. Then he twisted.

A kick of his bound legs sent them under the edge of the tepee, holding it up so that he could see. For a moment he held his breath with almost painful intentness, then expelled it in slow relief.

There was nobody here to watch him now, and with the accelerating tempo of the drums and dancing, there wasn't much chance of anybody thinking of him, or tearing himself away to come to see that he was safe. They were sure of that already.

The wagon tongue was where he had hoped it would be. By squirming around clumsily on his tether, he managed to get his toes under the end of it. It took all his strength to lie there and lift his legs, stretched as they were, to swing the heavy tongue a little off the ground and pull it around toward him. It meant minutes of patient effort before it was accomplished, but by then the end of it was under the edge of the tepee.

It was lucky that he had driven Grizzly's wagon on those days. In doing so, he had noticed that the end of the tongue had been partially splintered by a kicking horse. It had been strengthened by the addition of an iron bar, half an inch in thickness, two inches wide and four feet long, bolted on the top at the end.

And one side of that bar was rough and jagged. He had torn his hand on it when hitching up, which had impressed it on his mind.

It was a hard job to twist around so that he could bring his wrists against that rough, saw-like edge. But once that was accomplished, ten minutes of patient work cut through the rawhide. Five minutes later, he was free.

Bellew got to his feet exultantly. Things were going nicely. A yellow glow on the eastern horizon confirmed that the moon would be coming up in a few minutes, and that meant ample light for the next several hours. Everybody was excited enough now so that no one would pay any attention to him. And the real business of the evening wasn't quite ready to begin as yet. Which would give him time to make his own preparations.

Moving quietly, just in case anybody should be prowling, he crawled under the tarp of the wagon and found what he sought. Here were three kegs, wooden ones, each weighing two hundred and fifty pounds. They were about two and a half feet high, and not too wide. They were

bulky and heavy to handle, but he could do it now.

Curiosity had prompted him to take an inventory of the supplies of the various wagons, after he had been placed in charge. He had known what was in most of them, from loading and unloading them at various points along the road. Only Grizzly's wagon had somehow come through, in the lead as it had been, without bogging down or having to be unloaded once. No one else suspected those three kegs or what was in them.

GRUNTING, Bellew got one of them loose, lifted it down from the wagon, and considered for a minute. Then he started rolling it toward the center of attraction, going warily, so that he could choose his own place—and time. A lot depended on that.

In fact, the lives of everybody there hung on what he did now. Including those of Jimmy and her mother, in the last analysis, and his own. And, though none of them suspected that, of course, the lives of the Indians themselves.

Bellew could see Jimmy and her mother now, with some of the squaws, led out to watch, but kept under guard. Their faces were white and drawn. Jimmy made as if to turn away, but was prevented. This was a part of Grizzly's scheme tonight, and he wanted them to see it, whether they liked it or not.

Well, that was one time when Grizzly's plans dovetailed with his. It would be handy to have Jimmy close by. He could depend on her. And her hands and feet were free.

Just how important those things were, Bellew hated to think about. If there was ever a desperate scheme, this, he figured, was it. But only a desperate scheme would stand any chance now, and the situation warranted it. He had been dealt a couple of cards at last. And one or both of them might be trumps, if he could play them with the cool sureness that the gambler had shown when he had finally gotten the card he wanted. Only now a lot more than winning a pot of a few hundred dollars was at stake.

The moon was up now. That was a big factor..He glanced around. Not a cloud in the sky, anywhere. The next few hours would be good and light. And everything depended on that. On a night such as the previous one had been, he wouldn't have stood a chance.

He completed his preparations leisurely, gathering a pile of sticks, or faggots, which were pitch pine and would burn nicely, steadily, and last a long while. That long day was paying dividends now, for he had seen different squaws gathering wood, and had noted where they deposited the piles. Getting a good collection wasn't difficult now.

With these ready, and his barrel up-ended, he knocked off the end amid the din of drums and excited shouts. They were just about ready to start the real business of the evening now. Well, it might take a turn they hadn't suspected. Grizzly was there with the others, which helped a lot, too.

His back to a tree, Bellew lit one of his torches; then, as a hush of dreadful expectancy fell, he took advantage of it. His voice rang out, loud and sharp.

"Don't move, anybody! That means you, Grizzly! Hands up! And kindly take note. An arrow, or a bullet from behind, could get me—but even that couldn't stop me from dropping this torch into this barrel as I went down. And if that happens—well, I'll have plenty of company on my trip to the happy hunting grounds. Plenty. As you'll remember, Grizzly, this barrel is full of powder!"

CHAPTER XXVI

The Triple Cross

THE HUSH continued as Bellew's voice stopped. But the quality of it had changed. From a high moment of anticipation, it had swung to something evil and sinister. Many of them did not quite understand what this new development was all about, but they could grasp its significance from the strained attitude of Grizzly and the others who knew.

Bellew's appearance was on a par with the rest of it. Most of those in camp had had a look at him, and knew who he was. They had left him well tied a little while before; yet here he was, waving that burning torch close beside a barrel of powder. No one stirred.

Grizzly's face, in particular, had lost its ruddy color. He knew, better than most of the others, what would happen if the torch struck that powder. It would take Bellew, of course, and his companions of the long road, including Jimmy. But they were only a handful, compared to the others gathered around within radius of the blast that would ensue. And Grizzly knew that, in such a plight as he had placed them, Bellew and the others would prefer such a thundering exit to the other that had been in preparation for them.

"You'd better explain what would happen if this powder did go off," Bellew went on almost conversationally. "And tell everybody to stand right where they are, without moving. Then we'll parley."

One of the Indians, who appeared to have grasped the situation as well as any of them, snapped out a few words. Everyone was tense now, keyed to a pitch for action, but the knowledge that, even if a bullet should strike him, Bellew could still do as he had threatened, held them in check.

"Jimmy, I want you to come over here," Bellew went on, and she obeyed at once, giving him a quick little smile of encouragement.

"Hand me another torch," he instructed, and got it alight before tossing the old one away. Then he spoke bluntly.

"I'm taking charge here. Do as I say, and I give you all my word that there will be fair treatment for everybody. No Indian will need to be afraid of being punished or bothered if my orders are carried out. Those men are to be cut loose. One of them is going to ride to Bang-Up and bring back other white men. The others will stay right here with the rest of you, as hostages—just as you will be hostages for them. When the men from Bang-Up come, we will all go to town with the wagons. If my orders are carried out, I promise again that no Indian in this camp will be bothered."

Grizzly had regained his usual coolness by now. He looked around with an almost contemptuous smile.

"Do any of you think that he'd keep his word?" he demanded. "Or that the men from town would pay any attention to him?"

"Grizzly is afraid of what will happen to him, so he tries to frighten the rest of you," Bellew retorted. "But remember that this is powder, and if fire touches it, not one of you standing here will be alive. Even if you tried to run, it would do no good. And I warn you that I'll do it if necessary. No one is to try and leave here. My men are to be set free at once—and all but one held as hostages, as I said. But unless the men from town arrive before the moon sets, none of us here will see the sun rise."

THEY stared at him a moment, blinking a little. The thing was somehow fantastic, and they were still hesitant. Bellew reached into the keg, scooped out a handful of the contents, and tossed it on the ground a little way off. Then, as he had a new torch alight, he tossed the dying one on to that little pile.

Instantly it went up in a blaze of smoke and flame and hissing noise. There had been only a little powder, but it spoke far louder than words. The chief grunted an order, his own face looking a little strained.

At his words, the prisoners were released.

"Ike," Bellew instructed, "they'll give you a good pony. Get to Bang-Up in a hurry, rout out the camp, and get back here as quick as you can travel. But remember this. So long as these people do as I say, they are to be left in peace, without mistreatment. Impress that on those who come with you."

"I'll make it clear to 'em," Ike agreed, and, at a signal from the chief, he followed one of the braves out of the circle of light. A few moments later there came to their ears

the pounding of hoofs, rapidly receding.

Bellew issued instructions that the big bonfire be kept up, and that some of the people on the outskirts of the group should come in a little closer. But by now the strain and reaction was beginning to make itself felt.

He had succeeded so far, partly by luck, partly because he had taken them by surprise, and partly through colossal bluff. The real danger lay in the time that had to elapse before help could come from Bang-Up. That would probably be three hours, at the shortest. Time enough in which to think, and time enough for plenty to happen. And only one thing needed to happen.

Everyone was watching him tensely. This was no time to relax, to be caught napping. And the strain of standing within the radius of a powder keg, with flame hovering beside it, was something that would tell on the nerves of even such a stoical people as this.

Cleverly enough, Grizzly stood there with a half-contemptuous smile on his face, arms folded, watching them, and said not a word. That smile, the scorn in his glance, and the silence began to wear on them. Finally he chose to break it.

"You are brave men," he said. "Brave men, not afraid to die. Or are you afraid? Afraid of this one-man and the thing he holds in his hand? Are you so afraid of what he threatens now that you take his word and forget what will happen to you a little later on, if you obey him now?"

He paused a moment for effect. Bellew waited tensely. He might as well let Grizzly speak his piece as to interrupt and try to discredit him now. These Indians would listen to both of them before they took any action.

"He has made us a promise," the chief reminded Grizzly.

"A promise which he knows cannot be kept," Grizzly retorted contemptuously. "Have you forgotten the trap which he set for you the other night, and those who died in it? He was the man who set it. Does that sound as if he was your friend?"

ANGRY blood was rushing to the faces of the listeners at Grizzly's reminder. The chief glanced questioningly at Bellew, his own face impassive.

"That was war," Bellew reminded him. "It was not of our choosing—nor of your choosing. You obeyed Grizzly, who wanted us killed. You set a trap for us; we set a trap for you. I was sorry, for I knew that it was Grizzly, not you people, who were our enemies. But we had no choice."

"But men died that night," Grizzly went on. "Have you forgotten? And here in this camp you have held these white men as prisoners, you were about to torture them, to kill them. Do you think they will forget that? Or that the men from town will forget it when they hear what has happened? They will come with guns, many of them—and they will come to kill."

His words were having an effect, as he meant that they should. It seemed to him that he was playing a trump card that would be hard to top. If it came to a showdown here, he was willing to risk the powder barrel, and his next words explained that.

"These men are not anxious to die," he continued. "They fear death. And he has his woman there beside him. Do you think he will drop that torch? He is afraid to."

"If you want to risk it, Grizzly, go right ahead," Bellew invited. "I'm not anxious to die, but if it comes to a choice between all of us going this way, and taking our enemies along, or dying at your hands while you go on living—don't make any mistake as to what will happen. And now, if you've said what you wanted to, I will answer you."

"Good," the chief nodded. "We listen."

"You people have lived here, close to the mining camp, in peace with the white men there," Bellew declared. "There has been no war between you, or you would not camp here."

"That is true."

"Which means that you had no thought of war in your hearts against your white brothers. Then Grizzly came, and he brought you fire-water,

and made you drunk. You agreed to do as he told you, and he led you out to slaughter and to kill—promising that it would all be done in secret."

This was partly a guess, but Bellew could tell, from the startled glances exchanged, that he had hit the nail on the head.

"After that, you were in his power. If you did as he told you, he promised you revenge, and more firewater. And if you did not obey him, you knew that he would tell what you had done, and that the men from Bang-Up would come to fight and kill. He told you that every one in our wagon train had to be wiped out, so that no word of it would ever reach the people in Bang-Up."

From the way they were watching him now, Bellew saw that he was summing it up accurately. He went on with increasing confidence.

"But what about these wagons? Were you to have them? What was to be done with them? I will tell you. He was to sell them in Bang-up. He told you that. But did you ever think of the questions that the men of Bang-Up would ask him? Where were the drivers of these wagons? What story could he tell them? Only the truth. That the drivers had been killed by Indians."

THE silence was tense, now. And a hunted, desperate look was creeping into Grizzly's face.

"How could he explain that he had been left alive, out of all the wagon train, and left to sell them? Could he say that he was alive because he had led the rest of you, and had ordered his companions killed? Would he tell them that, and have them hang him? No. He would tell them that he had managed to escape, and, to make sure that they believed him, and did not think him a renegade, he would urge them to come with him and kill you here in camp, to avenge the murder of the men of his train. That is what he planned to do. Do you doubt it?"

It was plain that the chief and some of the others had a good grasp of English. They understood him. And the look on Grizzly's face now was all the answer that they needed. The logic of the thing was too plain for denial.

"I am sorry about the men who have had to die," Bellew went on. "But it was his fault. What has happened here was his fault, not yours, so I promise you again that it will not be held against you. I—"

He got no farther. Brent was a trapped Grizzly now, and he knew it. With a sudden roar, before anyone could stop him, he leaped, the viciousness o his rush taking even Bellew unprepared. There could be no escape, and he knew it, but there could be revenge. All in an instant he had twisted the torch from Bellew, and turned to plunge it into the powder keg.

CHAPTER XXVII

My Lady of the North

THINGS were happening with incredible swiftness. The chief had moved almost as fast as Grizzly, and so had Bellew in turn, lunging at him in an effort to knock his arm aside. Both of them were a fraction too slow for that.

But the chief's action had been characteristic of a leader. His tomahawk struck Grizzly squarely on the nose, splitting the top half of his face like an orange. His gesture of plunging the torch into the powder keg was halted in mid act, but even so, the flaming brand dropped from a suddenly lax hand into the keg.

An instant later, Bellew had snatched it out and flung it to the ground, scorching his fingers in the act. For a moment, the crowd stared, a little dazed, still not quite understanding. The chief advanced a slow pace or so, pointing at Bellew.

"You lie?" he questioned, still a little doubtfully, pointing to the powder keg.

Bellew shook his head, drew a full breath, and managed to force a grin.

"Look," he said. "It was full of powder. But I did not want to risk killing everyone, unless it had to be done. And powder is dangerous with fire so close to it. So I poured out some of the powder, and covered the rest with dirt. There is powder down

under—I brought up a handful of it and tossed it on the ground. And if the torch had been stuck down in the barrel, as he was starting to do—as he would have done if you hadn't stopped him—it would have exploded."

The chief grunted, examining the layer of dirt which had stopped the fiery torch when it fell, reaching on down to the powder itself. He knew, as well as Bellew, the closeness of that call. The heat of it might have had disastrous results before Bellew could snatch it out. He straightened, and extended his hand.

"You are brave man," he said. "And you speak true words. I am sorry for what has happened."

"So am I," Bellew agreed. "But he was responsible. It is past."

It was past. Grizzly Brent had been a member of the tribe, and he had been a bad Indian. As a member, he had managed to secure a position where he could bend them to his will, especially with the aid of whiskey. Probably he hadn't had much trouble in securing that quietly from some saloon-keeper in Bang-Up, who had taken him for just another prospector.

There was no question of the friendliness of the Indians, now that they understood just how they had been duped, and how in the end Grizzly had intended to betray them. His own guilt had been plain enough in his actions at the last. He was the man who was responsible for what had happened, and they knew it.

PECOS SMITH sauntered up, filling a stubby pipe and flexing his muscles a little.

"Blaze," he said, "I don't know's I've mentioned it, but I don't think I was ever quite so glad tuh see anybody in my life, as when yuh spoke up and kind of took charge of the situation. Right then, I'd have voted for yuh for president, or 'most anything else yuh might care to mention."

"And I still would, if it comes to that," McCoy declared. "I've been in some sort of unfriendly places before, but that had the look of being the worst of them."

"Yeah. And the thing that made me feel bad, we'd been rounded up without a chance tuh put up a scrap or nothing," Pecos mourned. "Didn't seem just right, but I guess, lookin' at it now, it was all for the best."

The atmosphere of the camp had changed greatly in the last few minutes. What remained of Grizzly had been dragged away, and Bellew was wise enough to ask no questions. Now the squaws were hurrying to prepare food for a big feast for everybody; the hospitality would be extended to the men from Bang-Up when they arrived. A holiday spirit had taken the place of the atmosphere which had prevailed earlier in the evening, as the people came to realize how they had been delivered from betrayal which could have had only one grim ending.

Bellew looked around restlessly. Jimmy had stood beside him, steady and ready during that long drawn-out crisis, but she had disappeared abruptly once things eased up. He had seen her with her mother, going off somewhere. Probably to have a good cry, he reflected. After all, she was a woman—and such a woman!—and even her nerves could not stand the strain of such events forever.

He turned, blinked and looked again. Jimmy was coming toward him—yes, it must be Jimmy. But this was a Jimmy that he had never beheld before. A woman in a soft, flowing dress, her short hair uncovered and ruffled up to a new softness, the pink of excitement staining her cheeks, her eyes at once excited and shy. Beside her was her mother.

She stopped, blushing a little under his gaze, and for a moment Bellew was utterly speechless—Quentin Bellew III, who had been known as something of a ladies' man, one who cared nothing for any of them, but who could make a fine speech on any and every occasion.

"Don't you like me this way, Blaze?" she asked.

"Like you?" Bellew repeated. "I—I never dreamed you could be so beautiful—"

Again she colored, then looked up at him suddenly to laugh.

"It's just this dress," she assured

him. "You'll get used to it. It's one of Mother's dresses. And now, sir, I want to introduce you to my mother—Mrs. John Carravan!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

Boss's Orders

"WHY, I'M delighted—" Bellew stopped, staring in sheer amazement. "Mrs. John—did you say Mrs. John Carravan?" he demanded. "Then you—Big John Carravan—"

"It all sounds rather mixed up, doesn't it, Mr. Bellew?" Mrs. Carravan nodded. She had something of the same matter-of-factness as her daughter, Bellew saw now. "But it's all true. If you'll come back to my tepee, where we can sit down, I think we'll have time for explanations before the people arrive from Bang-Up."

Bellew went with them, still partly in a daze. Some things that had been mysterious were beginning to clear up now. No wonder that Jimmy knew his country as she did, if she was the daughter of Big John Carravan. Jimmy Carran! She had shortened the Carravan a little, as a part of her disguise, but had not dropped it altogether.

"This is the first time I've ever seen you in a dress," he said. "And while I'm about it, Mrs. Carravan, I might as well confess two things to you. One is that I want to marry your daughter, if she'll have me. Since you trapped Grizzly into a confession that clears me of murder, I have a right to ask her. The other confession is that I don't even know her name. I know her only as Jimmy."

Mrs. Carravan smiled.

"She'll have to give you her own answer about that question, Mr. Bellew," she said. "But I don't believe you'll have much trouble if you go about that as well as you have handled other things on this trip. As to her name, it's Virginia. We always called her Jinny, and, of course, that's quite similar to Jimmy."

"Of course, it's all very simple, when you understand," Jimmy nodded. "I had heard of Jake Kilrain coming down to Hell Roaring and Ridleyburg, and he was one of Father's most trusted men. Of course, he couldn't tell what he knew, unless he found me or Father. I tried to get to him, but Grizzly stopped that. But I heard, indirectly, through hints he had dropped to others, that Mother was up here. And with Father back East on a wild-goose chase—well, you see why I had to come."

"I see that," Bellew agreed. "But there are a lot of other things that I don't understand."

"It all comes back to that dreadful Grizzly," Mrs. Carravan explained. "He wanted two things. He wanted to ruin John—and he wanted me."

She colored, hesitated, then went on.

"John's work has taken him off on long trips a good many times, of course, and so we have often been separated. Jinny here has been almost a neglected orphan, I'm afraid. Like Topsy, I guess she just growed."

"Considering the result, it's nothing to worry about," Bellew commented, with a glance which made Jimmy color.

"That's true enough, of course. Well, as you know, Grizzly has worked for a long time to try and bring about John's ruin. And because John trusted everybody, and refused to believe evil of them if he could help it, Grizzly had it rather easy. Last winter he came to me and demanded that I run away with him, as the price of saving my husband from ruin. He told me that he was in a position to ruin him, and would—unless I agreed.

"I REFUSED, of course. I told him, indignantly, that I would would let John know the sort of man he was befriending. But I had underestimated Grizzly, too. He had already made his plans. Some of these Indians were in his power, and would do anything he told them to. I was kidnapped, taken back into the hills, and have been held a prisoner ever since. I have been well treated, but only recently was I brought down here to this village. Grizzly came

the other day, and he had a new passion then—he intended to use me now to make Jinny give herself to him."

"Blaze knows just what he was like," Jimmy said quietly. "All of his schemes have failed, thanks to you, Blaze. But with Mother a prisoner, and no one knowing where she was or what had become of her, except Grizzly, he played the next part of his game. He wanted Dad out of the country, so that he could go ahead and finish wrecking his business—and if he had worked this trip as he planned, I guess he would have succeeded. Dad was frantic, of course, and so was I. He's spent almost his whole time, for months, trying to find what had happened to Mother and leaving Grizzly to run the business as he pleased."

No wonder, Bellew reflected, that most people in Hell Roaring had believed that Grizzly was owner of the big freighter lines.

"Finally," Jimmy went on, "Dad received word which seemed to be pretty reliable — Grizzly managed that—that Mother was back east, and ill. She was supposed to have had some sort of an accident, and lost her memory for a while, and in such a condition, of course, almost anything was possible. The story was that she was ill, penniless, and back east. Dad, of course, didn't waste a day. He dropped everything and set out to try and find her, and of course he has probably put in weeks back there to no purpose at all. Which left Grizzly with what he had wanted, a free hand.

"Soon after Dad had gone, I learned that Mother was probably somewhere up in this country, and with Jake Kilrain killed to keep me from verifying the story, it seemed likely to be true. I had to get up here, some way. And there was only one chance. Since Grizzly didn't know me, I took it. And you know the rest."

"And you've probably guessed how I was gagged and held as a decoy to trap Jimmy and yourself the other evening," Mrs. Carravan added. "It nearly broke my heart, but I couldn't help myself. And I want to give you a mother's thanks for taking care of her little girl for her, when no one else could, or would. It was wonderful of you, sir. And I'll never cease to be grateful to you."

"I'll never cease to be grateful for having had the chance," Bellew replied soberly. "Whatever I've been able to do for Jimmy, she has done ten times as much for a poor, scared tenderfoot—she enabled me to keep going, showed me how to be a man."

"I don't think you needed much showing," Jimmy smiled. Suddenly she jumped to her feet.

"Listen!" she cried. "I believe they're coming from Bang-Up! Now there'll be a celebration—but you'll have to keep them under control at the start, till they understand everything, Blaze."

"I'll do that," Bellew agreed. "Come on." He stepped outside, then stopped. "But they won't be here for a little while—and before that—well, there's something I want settled. Are you going to marry me?"

"Are those orders?" Jimmy asked demurely. "Because, if they are, I suppose I'll have to do as the train boss says."

(THE END)

IN OUR FORTHCOMING ISSUE

Another POWDER VALLEY Novel

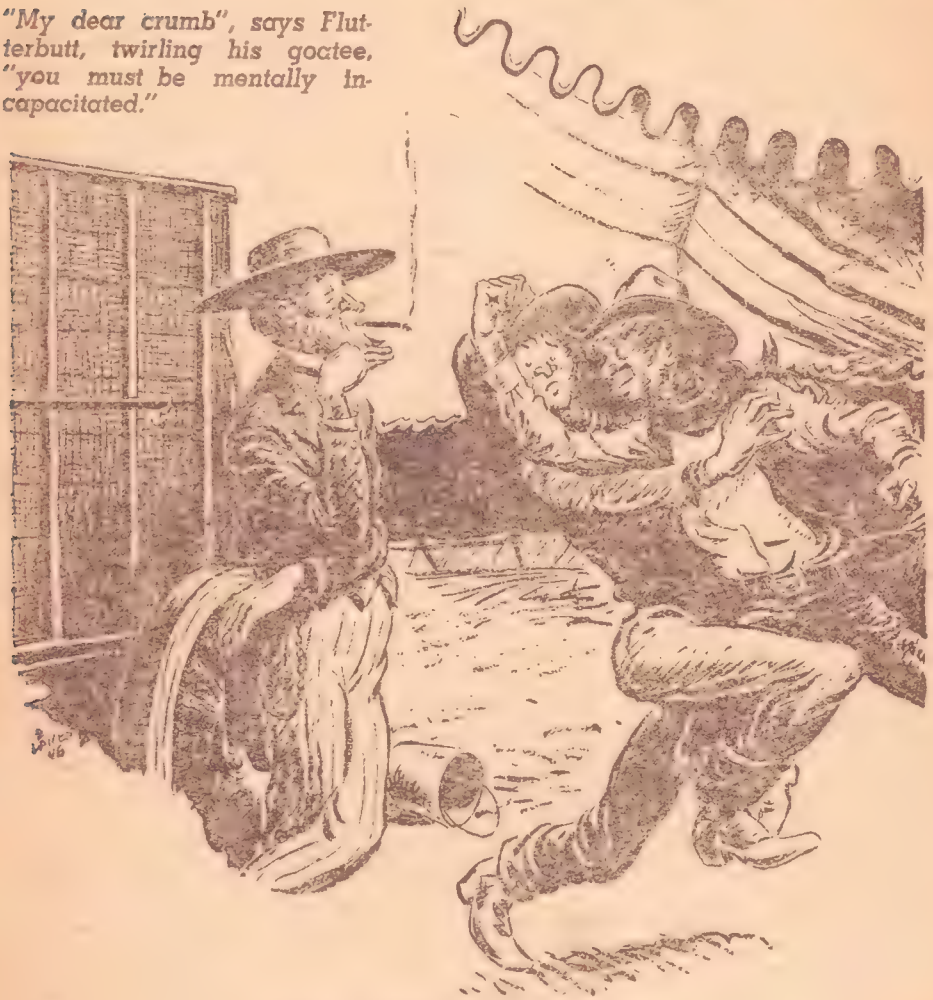
By PETER FIELD

Watch for

The Road To Laramie

RAW, Medium and WELL-DONE

"My dear crumb", says Flutterbutt, twirling his goatee, "you must be mentally incapacitated."



By TOM THURSDAY

Why sweat yourself to death punchin' cows when you c'n make easy money, 'thout worryin' 'bout thuh law none? How? Ask Professor Flutterbutt!

WELL, pals, I hope things are breaking better for you than they did for Professor Ambrose Flutterbutt, the Psychic Medium and Marvel. Not wanting to keep you in suspense, I'll report now that the hero of this soap opera is Horse Tooth Harrigan, the smarty of the first part.

In case you don't know me, as Gen-

eral Custer remarked to Sitting Bull, I'm Freckle-Puss Perkins, manager of the side-show with McGimmick and O'Gaff's Wild West Circus and Freak Hippodrome, a ten-wagon mud show that opened the season at Homicide Center, Arizona. Though I have personally booked the regular flock of freak attractions from all parts of the world—see the outside banners—it's Old Man McKeezo who hires Professor Flutterbutt.

"The kid show is dead," remarks the deep-thinking boss. "It needs new life. Get the idear outta your thick skull that all cowboys and rangers are dopes. They crave variety. Professor Flutterbutt will give 'em variety. These Western beanheads are sick of looking at Fat Girls, Bearded Ladies, and Snake Charmers. This Flutterbutt yamneck will lay 'em in the cactus."

"Yeah," says Horse Tooth Harrigan, "but I never knew Captain Kidd had a brother." The Old Man lets that go over his head.

"This guy can actually talk to the dead," goes on the boss. "Very marvelous, indeed."

"So what?" says Horse Tooth. "I been talking to the dead for years, right from the bally-stand. What's more," steams up Horse Tooth, "I knew that bum years ago when he was high-pitching *Dr. Alonzo Quimm's Diamond Hair Hoister and Dandruff Killer.* That was almost ten-year ago and his name was then Jake McGonigle. He makes out that he don't know me, but the big flounder-head borreys ten bucks from me and promptly forgets same."

"You are nuts," says the boss, politely. "Professor Flutterbutt is a college man."

"Dartmouth or Deer Lodge?" snorts Horse Tooth.

"Shut up," sniffs the Old Man, and stomps down the midway.

I take Horse Tooth to one side, and say, "Are you kidding about that new jerk?"

"Kidding, your Uncle Jesse James!" snaps Horse Tooth. "I could spot him by the scent alone. He was smooth-shaven when I knew him. Now he has a goatee and a set of whiskers. But I'd recognize that jail bait if he was disguised as Tecumseh."

Professor Flutterbutt has his "studio" at the end of the tent, partitioned off with canvas sidewalls and very private. His admission charge is two-bits a head or even half-head. On the opening night he packs the towners in like fancy clothes in a chorus gal's trunk. The paying patrons are cowboys, rangers and what have you on the rancho. Homicide Center is a typical Western stage-stop, with outlaws, in-laws, and a fine flock of mother-in-laws. The sheriff is the main mugg and he does his own collecting in the gambling joints and dance halls.

CURIOUS as to Professor Flutterbutt's act, me and Horse Tooth duck around to his outside wall and cock two sets of extra-large ears. In his lecture, which we can hear plainly, the professor breaks down and confesses that he was gifted from birth with positive psychic powers. With the aid of his "spirit guide"—some tramp entitled Little Big Eyes—he claims he can contact the next world, wherever that is. However, he insists that the audience must remain pin-drop quiet, otherwise Big Little Eyes will get sore as hell and refuse to do his stuff.

Well, after filling the ears of the customers with ten minutes worth of granulated cactus and saddle oil, the professor lowers his voice and gets very confidential. He states that his spirit guide is working on a system to reproduce real money, and that the system should be fully developed within the next few days. In other words, the guide will duplicate any coins or bills that the audience cares to lay upon the table. For instance, if some dope—pardon, customer—places a dollar bill on the table, the spirit will promptly duplicate it with another, making two bucks instead of one.

"Boy," whispers Horse Tooth, "ain't that some oatmeal, huh? Why, the crooked crocodile should get a load of buckshot in the pants!"

"That's a trick I want to see," I

says. "If it works, he can put all the banks and U. S. Mints in the poor house. What's the gimmick?"

"It's the old apcray," says Horse Tooth. "Sure, he'll take a few days to spring the gag, then *blooey*—hail and farewell!"

"What d'yer mean," I ask, "hail and farewell?"

"Wait and see," says Horse Tooth. Then he grabs me by the arm, and whispers, "Quick; he's doused the lights! Let's breeze in and watch the louse operate."

Lifting the sidewall canvas, we sneak into the studio, unobserved by any one. It's almost as dark as black ink in a coal mine.

"Now, good people," says the professor, "I want to impress upon your minds that there is nothing avaricious about this business of reproducing money. It is merely a demonstration of a great psychic power on the part of my spirit guide, Little Big Eyes. That being understood, I will now ask some person in the audience to place a small coin upon the table."

A quarter hits the table with a bing and the professor says, "I thank you for your faith and confidence."

"Listen to the ape!" whispers Horse "Boy, what a line; what a line!"

"Now," continues the professor, "before continuing with this scientific demonstration it will be essential to have the proper atmosphere. In order to attain this, we must all sing some old and sentimental songs. All right; what shall we sing?"

Some cow waddie suggests "Who Scalped Oscsola In the Moonlight?" The professor holds up his hands in horror. "Such a song is not attuned to the spirit world. I suggest that we sing, 'The Cowboy's Last Lament'. That is a grand and soothing melody, one that I'm sure Little Big Eyes will approve."

THE audience lets out with a vim and a large dose of vigor and kills the song with voices from whisky-soprano to gin-basso. When the outrage against good singing has subsided, the professor flops into a trick trance and asks his spirit guide if he chances to be floating around in the neighborhood. This is the cue for Little Big Eyes to answer through the large trumpet hung directly in back of the professor. But the guide fails to report, and is probably off in space, playing around with a blonde angel and half-pickled to boot.

"It is apparent," intones the professor, "that we have not acquired the correct atmosphere. I'm afraid more singing will be necessary. I suggest we all sing, 'My Mother Was a Lady.'"

"I doubt it," whispers Horse Tooth. "No lady could have a son-of-a-witch like him!"

The boys murder that one and, when it is over, the professor again asks his spirit pal if he is in the vicinity. Much to everyones amazement the trumpet lets go with a few well-bred squawks and squeaks, after which the guide remarks that he's ready to get down to business. Then the professor asks Little Big Eyes if he would be so kind and generous as to duplicate the two-bits on the table. Shortly after a clink is heard on the table, indicating that the guide has listened to papa.

"Lights!" snapped the professor. Just as we duck out of the tent I notice another quarter beside the first one. I don't know what happens later but soon the customers troop out with puzzzled expressions on their maps.

Horse Tooth Harrigan stops the guy who contributed the first two-bits and asks a few potent questions.

"Did the professor give you the other quarter?"

"Shore did, pard," says the lad, slapping his hairpants. "It's wunnerful; ain't it? Whut's the use of herdin' steers when yuh kin git money like-a thet?"

"Listen, fellow," I horns in, "why didn't you put five bucks on the table, instead of two-bits? Then you would have had ten bones."

"Yeah; I know. If I hadda, I woulda hadda. S'long, pard."

"Coming back tomorrow night?" asks Horse Tooth.

"Shore am! The perfessor says we gonnah have a meetin' every night

this week and work the guide kinda easy-like. He says if Little Big Eyes suspects we are greedy fur gold he might run away and nevah come back. Wal, see yuh tomorrer!"

Ten minutes later Professor Ambrose Flutterbutt strolls out of the tent. He's puffing a very vile cigarro and it stinks to high heaven and low hell.

"Smell anything?" sniffs Horse Tooth. "I never knew we was in skunk country."

"If you chased yourself," woofed the professor, "there would be one skunk left."

"Lemme at that burglar!" snorts Horse Tooth, hauling back a right fist.

"Peace, gents; peace," I says.

"Then tell that blue-ribbon crook to pay me back that tenner he borreys from me ten-year ago!"

Flutterbutt twirls his well-waxed goatee a moment, then remarks, "My dear crumb, you must be mentally incapacitated. We do not mix in the same social circles. Well, what can you expect from a guaranteed guttersnipe?"

"Gimme 'at ten bucks!" howls Horse Tooth, trying to break away from my grasp. "Them Civil War whiskers and Buffalo Bill goatee ain't fooled me none! You may have picked up a load of five-and-ten buck words since I saw you last, but you and me was born on the same side of the tracks. I'd know you if you was disguised as Wild Bill Hickok. And you better gimme 'at ten!"

"Disgusting and revolting," says the professor and walks away briskly.

"Look," I says to Horse Tooth, "are you positive that that beezark is Jake McGonigle?"

"Hell, yes. If he ain't Jake McGonigle, then there ain't a cow in Texas. And the only difference between that bum and Captain Kidd is that the cap done his thieving on the water."

NEXT night Flutterbutt holds his second seance or meeting. He has mostly the same audience, with some new chumps added However, the meeting is a floperoo, meaning no dice. Little Big Eyes, his spirit guide, must have been off on a tour of the other planets, seeing what they had in the line of redheads, blondes and brunettes. He goes through the usual hokus-jokus motions, such as having the customers sing solemn ditties, but the guide refuses to give him a squeak out of the trumpet.

Finally, the professor asks to be excused claiming that some loon in the audience must have peeved Little Big Eyes and made him sore.

"What's up his goatee now?" I asks Horse Tooth, when the meeting let out.

"He's just putting out the sucker bait," says Horse Tooth. "When he gets the boobs all a-flutter, he'll bump 'em. He'll spring a fast one, and then blow. Wait and see!"

"You mean he has an ace in the hole?"

"Ace—hell. He's got the whole deck! But if it's what I *think* it is, I'll have a few aces in holes m'self!"

Comes the third night. The usual bunch, with more added, walks into Flutterbutt's boob-haven. Again he goes through the magic motions. This time Little Big Eyes seems to be in much better humor. When two of the cowpokes drop four-bits each on the table, they are duplicated. When the lamps are lighted, the table has two bucks, instead of one.

This demonstration in easy money gets the customers all excited. Why work for a living when dough comes out of no place for doing nothing? One guy yells to the professor, "Hey, pardner, how about puttin' ten dollahs on that table?"

"Sorry," says Flutterbutt, "but you gentle folks must realize that my guide is a highly sensitized, moral and ethical spirit. If he suspected that we were money crazy, he would leave us forever. However," goes on the professor, "if you all will assemble here again tomorrow night, I shall make an effort to talk to my guide and gain his good graces."

The next night is another floperoo. Although the boys sing the sweetest songs, old Little Big Eyes won't give them a tumble. But the fifth night is the ant's sugar. Flutterbutt really

gets the lads hopped up proper. He asks three of the boys to place cartwheel silver dollars on the table. When the lamps are lighted, each buck has been duplicated with another, courtesy of Little Big Eyes.

The fifth and final night is the coyotes' howl.

"MY GOOD friends," begins the professor, "I trust I have given you a good demonstration of my ectoplasmic powers. And now I have some exceptionally good news for you. Last night, after you had left, I got in touch with my spirit guide and had a heart-to-heart talk with him. I told him what a fine, upstanding bunch of real gentlemen you were, and I informed him that you were all public-spirited and against liquor, women, and all types of wrong doing. In brief, my good friends, I told my guide that, if he would be kind enough to duplicate your twenty-dollar gold pieces, placed upon this same table, that you would use the money for noble and charitable purposes."

"As for me," goes on the professor, "I ask nothing in return. I am able to live on the small admission fee you pay at the door. What's more, I glory in the work I am able to do. Ah, my good friends, you cannot realize the satisfaction I receive from doing work that advances science. What greater glory does a mortal man want than the knowledge that he is helping his fellow man? Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson, and other great men, were happy to help the world's progress. I am glad to be in their class!"

The professor pauses for stage effects. Then he goes on, "I assume you gentlemen have all brought your twenty-dollar gold pieces for duplications?" This is greeted with a chorus of "Yes's!" from the audience. The lamps go out and me and Horse Tooth sneak under the sidewall, as usual.

"Now, my good friends," gloops on Flutterbutt, "I suggest that we all sing 'Silver Threads Among the Gold.' My guide seems to like that old favorite and I want you folks to sing it with much fervor and eclat. As soon as we have finished singing the first verse, step up and place your twenty-dollar gold pieces on the table. All ready, my good friends; start singing!"

They butcher the first verse and, at the end, the sound of metal hits the table in a rainfall of clinks.

"Now the chorus, gentlemen," begs Flutterbutt. "That's it, gentlemen—*louder!* Put your heart and souls into it. *Louder!*"

The boys almost knock the roof off with their singing. When it is over, not a sound was heard, and they sat in the total darkness for half a minute.

"I guess it's up to me to light the lamps," says Horse Tooth Harrigan.

"What d'yer mean," I says, "up to you?"

"Watch," he buzzes, "the fun is about to commence to begin!"

A few seconds later the lights flood the tent. Professor Ambrose Flutterbutt is not among those present. The smart smick has scooped up what was on the table and has departed hence and also thither. He did this while the customers were singing.

I figure that we'd have to quell some fine, Western riots, when the little lads found they had been flimflammed.

HORSE TOOTH goes to the front of the platform, in front of the table, and holds up his hands for attention.

"Well, folks," says Horse Tooth, "I hope you are all glad that you listened to me last night!"

My ears begin to buzz and my eyes start to pop. What the Sam Houston was Horse Tooth yapping about? Whatever it was, he never let *me* in on it!

"Yore darn tootin', we are!" yells several cowboys. "Thanks, pardner!" adds a guy in the rear. Horse Tooth stands there and grins broadly.

"Twenty-dollar gold pieces," goes on Horse Tooth, "don't never grow on cactus plants. So you better take *yours* and run home, before some one

(Continued On Page 112)

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Jimmy ran his dirty sleeve across his sweating forehead. Then, a heavy bucket in each hand, he started through the buckbrush for the railroad crew. And again Matt Hawkins hollered.

"Make tracks, Jimmy!"

Jimmy O'Shane gritted his teeth, fought back a hot reply. Big Matt Hawkins had no call to boss him so hard. If he hadn't needed this job as water-boy so bad, he'd have told Matt Hawkins to—Jimmy made his anger die; his brother, Marty, was in jail in Tent City, and—

"I'm coming, Hawkins."

Short, stocky, sixteen-year-old Jimmy disregarded his aching back, thought of Marty. Marty was twenty-three. He had been in the state pen for a year, been pardoned. A year ago, he had taken up a homestead near Tent City. He had, as a boyish prank, robbed a store—going in one night and looting it. Now, sober, reliable, he and Jimmy had worked hard on their homestead.

Two months before, the railroad had built in. Tent City turned into a beehive of activity. By Jennigan had come in with the parasites that followed the railroad crew, and by Jennigan had been a cell-mate with Marty.

Two nights before, the combined passenger-freight train had been robbed below Tent City; a month's payroll, going to the construction crew, had been stolen by two bandits. While one held up the baggage coach, the other had remained hidden in the brush, just the tip of his rifle sticking out to cover the engine crew. But passengers and crew-members had seen both of them ride away from the robbery.

One had ridden a black horse with a blazed face and four white-stockinged legs. That black had been a dead ringer for Marty's horse, Midnight. The sheriff had taken Marty to jail in Tent City.

"I was home that night," Marty had declared.

"Can you prove it?"

They had Marty there; he had no witnesses. Maybe Jimmy had helped his brother, maybe it was he who had covered the engine crew? But big

Matt Hawkins had killed that talk; Jimmy, he said, had been at the construction camp that night.

The sheriff had been studiously thoughtful. "Well, your word clears the kid, Matt, but Marty here just fits the one bandit's description. Of course, the holdup man was masked, but he was the same build as Marty, and he rode a black horse that must've been Midnight—t'ain't no other black with them markin's in this section."

And now Marty was in jail. . . again.

"Come on along, water-hog!" hollered Matt Hawkins.

JIMMY scrambled up the soft grade, buckets dead-weights on his aching arms. He set them on the flatcar beside the two barrels. Matt Hawkins, a bearded, heavy man, drank deeply.

"Good water." He washed his mouth out, spat on the raw earth.

"Don't waste that water!" Jimmy's voice was angry. "It's too hard a work totin' it in to waste it!"

Hawkins grinned crookedly. "If you don't like the job, turn in your time." He deliberately washed his mouth again, spat out the water. "We'll make a man outa you on this job or kill you, Jimmy."

"You won't kill me."

"Then, we'll make a man out of you."

Holding his anger, Jimmy climbed on the flatcar, poured his buckets into one of the barrels, bringing the water to its brim. Both barrels were full now and would last the crew the rest of the day. He set his buckets down.

"I'd like to bust you in the snoot, Hawkins."

"Try it some day," said Hawkins. "But you better wait till you grow up, Irish kid." He strode ahead of the engine and started giving orders to the fresno-men who were building the grade.

Jimmy glared at Hawkins' back. Quit, huh, or make a man out of him? Or work him until it killed him? Well, he'd show Hawkins. But maybe he shouldn't talk back to the big man.

(Continued On Page 96)

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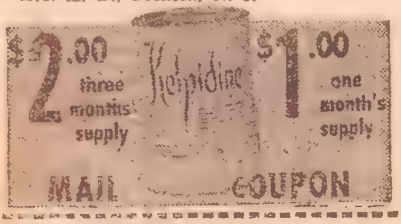

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(Continued From Page 95)

He and Marty needed this job bad, Even though it paid only five dollars a week. The summer had been dry. . . exceptionally dry.

Wheat and barley had sprouted, then burned flat. The corn, too, had died. No, Marty needed him on this job, because the homestead wouldn't pay a cent this year, and there would be the taxes to pay and they'd have to have a winter stake. The thought of Marty in jail again almost made him sick.

"Perk up, Jimmy," a voice said.

Jimmy glanced up. Casey Mahoney, the engineer, leaned out of the cab, up there on his wheezing locomotive. Jimmy liked Mahoney; they got along swell. When he grew up, he hoped he'd be a man like Mahoney.

"Worried about Marty?" asked the genial engineer.

"Marty's innocent," declared Jimmy, "and I'm going to prove it. . . some way. He told me so, himself. And besides, the law ain't got a bit of real evidence against him, except that black horse that looked like Midnight."

"They never found any of the payroll money on him, huh?"

"Not a bit." Jimmy studied his friend. Here was a real man, not a blustering, tough gent like Hawkins. "You think he's innocent, don't you?"

"I hope so."

Jimmy grew confidential. "Listen, Mahoney, I've got my barrels full, and that water'll last the crew all day. Now if Matt Hawkins asks where I am, you just tell him that I've gone ahead, looking for water for when we move camp next week. You'll do that for me, won't you?"

"Sure. Where you goin'?"

"I've got plans," said Jimmy.

The construction-crews living-cars were on a siding built along the base of the mountain. Jimmy went in on the side that faced the right-of-way and came out on the opposite side. Nobody saw him as he ran into the pines. An hour later he was in Tent City.

MARTY O'SHANE paced his cell. When he saw Jimmy he came to the barred door, his freckled,

homely face showing a ray of hope. "Can you get me out, kid?"

Jimmy shook his head. Marty's eyes went lifeless. "I tried to get the judge to take our homestead as your bail, but he won't do it—says the place isn't worth enough as security."

Marty glanced up and down the corridor. They were the only two in the jail. "By Jennigan's tangled up in this, Jimmy. He ain't in Tent City for any good. And he hates my guts 'cause I beat the hell out of him when we were in the pen. He never forgets. But who was the fella in the brush?"

"Has By Jennigan got a pal?"

Marty considered. "Not that I know of. Of course, he might have, I don't know. Here comes Patsy."

Patsy Jones was a newcomer to Tent City. She ran a beauty parlor in a tent beside the Ace High saloon. There were very few good women in town, so most of her trade consisted of harpies from the saloons.

"Hello, Marty." Her voice did not fit her face, Jimmy thought. Her face was too hard, too brittle. She turned her deep eyes on Jimmy. "Hello, Jimmy."

Jimmy said, "Hello."

"Isn't it terrible about Marty?" she said. "The sheriff has no reason to hold him. Why, I've tried to get him out—I've talked with the sheriff and with the judge—they're so stubborn."

"I'll get out, honey," encouraged Marty.

Jimmy thought, "So it's reached the *honey* stage," but didn't say anything. He didn't cotton to this slender, hennaed woman with her sleek, hard surface, and he couldn't see what Marty saw in her. Nor, for that matter, he couldn't understand why she was so interested in Marty. There were plenty of gamblers, men with easy-come, easy-go money, for her to fall in with.

Jimmy said, "Well, hang and rattle, Marty." He tried to make his voice light, but the task was hard. The under-sheriff, a burly individual, came through the door that led to the sheriff's office, and he and Jimmy almost collided.

"Why don't you look where you're goin'?" he demanded.

(Continued On Page 98)

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Blue Ribbon Western

(Continued From Page 97)

Jimmy bulled his shoulder against the under-sheriff and shoved him back. "Sorry," he said in mock apology.

The under-sheriff's beefy face reddened. "I'd take you apart arm by leg," he growled, "if you were twenty-one and I didn't tote this badge!"

Sheriff Nelson was at his desk. He hollered, "Tie up that loose talk, Potter," and to Jimmy, "Quit tantalizing Potter, kid."

Sheriff Nelson was a slim, quiet man—an honest man. Jimmy said, "I'm getting Marty out, Sheriff. Some way I'll get him out. . . He never robbed that train. Sure, a man riding a horse like Midnight helped hold it up. But where is the money—the stolen money?"

Nelson scratched his chin. "I don't know, Kid. So far, we haven't found a bit of it, and Marty claims he doesn't know where it is. We've searched a number of places, and we got one more place to look over again." The lawman turned his swivel chair as Casey Mahoney entered. "Howdy, Mahoney. Take a seat."

Mahoney wiped his forehead. "Hot out," he said.

Jimmy asked, "How come you're not out on the job, Mahoney?"

"Ran the engine in for supplies," said the engineer. "That new cook ran short of his orders. You could have rode in with me, Jimmy."

Jimmy went outside. He walked down Tent City's dirty street, the heat glaring on him. He was sick and troubled. Patsy Jones said, "Hello, Jimmy," as he passed her tent and he glanced inside. She was doing some work on a dance-hall girl and Jimmy snorted. Probably fixing her up for the night trade.

But he said, "Howdy."

They hadn't found the money.... There was only one horse that looked like Midnight...and that was Midnight. Now how had the bandits found out that the payroll had been scheduled to come in on that run of the express-freight? Casey Mahoney had said he'd sure been surprised when he'd seen that stack of logs blocking the rails....

FOREMAN MATT HAWKINS came out of the Down Dog saloon, and Jimmy ducked back between two tents too late. "What're you doing in town?" demanded the grade boss.

Jimmy returned his glare. "I filled the water barrel and that'll hold you for the day. I'm going to get Marty out of jail. By the way, I could ask you the same question you asked me."

"You're a runty Irish kid," said Matt Hawkins, "and you're too smart for your own good. I came in with Casey during noon. You'd better climb on that engine and go back with us."

Jimmy thought of losing his five dollars a week. He matched that mentally with the thought of helping Marty. Hawkins saw his mental struggle. "All right, you can have the afternoon off, but don't get into any trouble."

"You sick?"

Matt Hawkins grinned. "No, but you soon will be, if you don't bridle that tongue of your'n."

Jimmy got a horse at the livery and headed south toward the homestead. He rode the rimrock: he was a puzzled, worried kid. Sheriff Nelson had searched everywhere, he'd said, and he hadn't found the stolen money. That meant, too, that he had also searched the homestead shack. But Hawkins had mentioned about searching again.

Jimmy tied his rented horse in the bullberry bushes and sat on the rimrock, looking down on the shack. A sudden thought hit him. Leaving his horse there, he went to the shack. Whoever had held up the payroll surely could lay the finger on Marty if they left some of the stolen money in the shack.

Jimmy searched thoroughly, found no money. He went to the barn and had just entered it when the rider on the big black horse came into the clearing. Jimmy ducked into the barn and watched through a crack. The man left the big black and ran into the house. Jimmy studied the horse.

This bronc was just about the same size and build as Midnight, but he

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(Continued From Page 99)

lacked the blaze face and white-stockinged legs. Wonder and astonishment tugged at him. Who was this gent, and what was he doing here?

The man came out. Jimmy could not see his face; he was too far away. He stepped up and rode out, heading to the west. Jimmy waited, puzzlement growing. Then, he went into the house, and searched again.

The man had gone to the corner trunk; Jimmy saw the dust of his boots there. He went carefully through the trunk's contents and, in one corner, he found a roll of bills; they had not been there when he had first searched the house. He took it out—a slim roll—with a crisp ten dollar bill on top of a bunch of other bills. He was amazed, now.

This man—mysterious rider—had left these here. And why? The payroll had come in all in ten dollar bills, he knew, And this was part of the payroll loot. He wished he could have seen the man's face, but the fellow had worn a red bandanna, and he'd held his head low.

Somebody was aiming to frame Marty. They'd leave these bills and when Sheriff Nelson searched—but he had already searched, Jimmy knew. Then, suddenly, Jimmy remembered what the sheriff had said, down in Tent City. He was going to search again.

SCRAMBLING over shale, Jimmy climbed to where he'd hidden his horse. The rider on the black was a mile or so away, heading at a long lope toward the hills. Jimmy swung in behind, pushing his horse hard. He was crossing a dry wash when Sheriff Nelson hollered to him.

"Where you going, Kid?"

Jimmy pulled up, angry. Nelson rode out of the brush. Jimmy said, "What's it to you, Nelson, where I go? Ain't a man got a right to ride where he pleases in this country without you—"

Nelson slouched in saddle, grinned. He held up his right hand. "Hold up on them words, Kid," he allowed. "I'm a lawman and it's my duty to be suspicious of anybody remotely con-

nected with a case. But you seem to be riding for a high spot, at that speed."

Evidently the lawman had not seen the rider on the black. Jimmy thought of showing the sheriff the roll of bills in his pocket, the bills hidden by the mysterious rider in the trunk. Then he threw that idea in a mental wastebasket. Nelson might not believe this tall story.

"You mind your business, Sheriff, and I'll tend to mine."

Jimmy rode on and Sheriff Nelson watched him, scratching his head thoughtfully. Then the fold of the hills hid Jimmy. When he reached the high ridge, Jimmy could see the sheriff below him, riding toward the homestead. That brought a new wrinkle to Jimmy's freckled forehead.

Jimmy pulled in and watched the sheriff enter the shack. That meant, then, that Nelson was re-searching the place again, and this rider had ridden out ahead of him, and spotted the hidden bills in the trunk. . . Now who would know that Nelson was riding this direction?

Maybe his under-sheriff. . . The under-sheriff, too, would fit the description of the rider—similar build and shape. Jimmy had never liked the under-sheriff. He swung his gaze west; the rider had disappeared.

Jimmy rode west, looking for tracks, but the lava bed left no marks. Disgruntled, disgusted, he turned toward Tent City. A recluse, Old Man Siccalon, lived in this section, and Jimmy decided to ride over and see if the oldster had seen the man on the black.

He did not ride openly into the yard. Siccalon was an eccentric hermit and hated his solitude disturbed. Therefore he left his horse in the buckbrush and went ahead on foot, coming in behind the barn. And there he saw the black horse unsaddled now, munching hay in the manger.

Jimmy studied the horse and saw it bore a Heart Slash brand. That meant nothing, he decided. He heard a dog barking up at the house and he knew the cur had caught his scent.

(Continued On Page 102)

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(Continued From Page 101)

He pulled back into the brush and went to his horse. From this high vantage he looked down on Siccalon's outfit.

The recluse—a thin, stooped man—came outside, looked around, spoke to the cur and silenced him. Evidently the old man was alone and that meant that the black's rider had left. Tent City was only a mile or less away and the man could be walking into town now.

JIMMY searched the hills that lay between him and the construction camp, but he saw no sign of a man along that rocky, arid section. There was no use in asking Siccalon who owned the black. The recluse would know, but he would not tell.

Jimmy mounted and rode toward town. Dismay and bitterness pulled at him, making his freckled, boyish face too stern. He heard the rattle of hoofs and turned his horse, and then lost his tenseness as Sheriff Nelson came riding into view.

"Where you been?" asked Jimmy, like he didn't know.

"Riding around." Nelson's faded blue eyes were keen knives probing him. "And where did you go after leaving me? I doubled back and tried to track you—but what were you doing on the lava beds?"

"Just riding."

They rode into town together, the sheriff taciturn and silent, Jimmy pondering with his many thoughts. Again he wondered if he should tell the sheriff about the bills, and again he changed his mind. He left his borrowed horse at a hitchrack and went into the Down Dog saloon. Casey Mahoney was drinking beer at the bar.

"Thought you'd be out to camp," said the genial engineer.

Jimmy said, "I'd like to talk to you alone, Mahoney," and the engineer followed him to a deserted card-table across the room, carrying his mug of beer. This man, Jimmy knew, was his friend—he wasn't a hard-cased gent like Matt Hawkins. He told him about finding the stolen money, of the rider on the black horse.

(Continued On Page 104)

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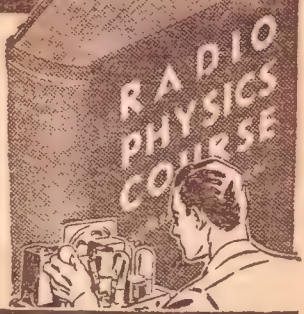

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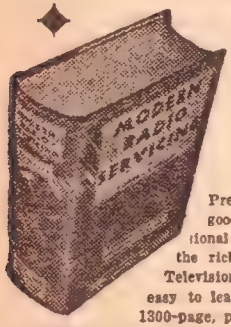

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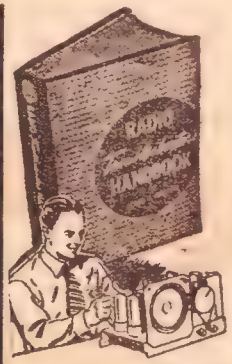

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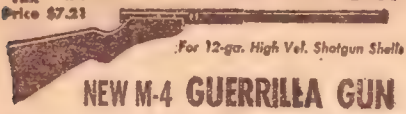

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(Continued From Page 102)

"And you didn't recognize that rider huh, Kid?"

Jimmy shook his head. "Too far away and he kept his face purty well hid in his bandanna. Now who do you figure it could have been, Casey?"

Casey Mahoney was very thoughtful. "I don't know," he finally said. "You got the money now, huh?"

"Yep."

"Keep this between us," said Mahoney. "Don't tell the sheriff or a soul. You got a clue to get Marty out of jail, so keep it. Keep your eyes open and your mouth closed, and you'll clear this up, Jimmy."

Jimmy felt a lift of confidence. "Sure is good to have a friend," he told Mahoney.

Mahoney drank his beer, paid for it, and left. Jimmy wondered suddenly what the engineer was doing in Tent City. Probably didn't have anything to do on the job so had taken the afternoon off—and maybe Matt Hawkins was in town, too. Jimmy went to the short-order counter and ate. By Jennigan came in and sat beside him and ordered. A sleek, dandified gent, he tried to pick up a conversation, but Jimmy only grunted replies, so By Jennigan gave up and fell to eating. He ate hurriedly, then left.

Jimmy paid and went outside to his horse. The thought of the black—the horse out there in Old Man Siccalon's barn—was bothering him. Sooner or later, the owner would come after that horse.

He mounted and rode out. Dusk was coming across the mountains. A few minutes later, hidden by brush, he sat and looked down on Siccalon's outfit. Finally, he quit his horse, went down-slope on foot, came in from behind the barn. The black was still there and two other horses were with him. All of the broncs were saddled and ready for the trail.

JIMMY scowled, then stiffened as something round, something hard, jabbed into his back. He turned and looked and Casey Mahoney stood behind him, a .45 against him. Jimmy stared, heart pounding.

"It's me—Jimmy."

"I can recognize you." All cordiality had left the engineer's voice. "Damned fool kid, bustin' in where you ain't needed. Hey, By! Hey, Patsy!"

"What'd you want?" growled a voice from Siccalon's cabin. By Jennigan's voice.

"The kid came nosin' around and I nabbed him."

"Bring him in, Casey."

Casey Mahoney rammed the gun in hard. "Get a-movin' to the cabin, punk!"

Jimmy was in a turmoil. But his wonderings were cleared up when he and Mahoney entered Siccalon's cabin. The place was all in disorder. Chairs were broken, pots slung around, the table upset.

By Jennigan, his silk shirt torn, one eye rapidly swelling, stood in the middle of the room, panting and puffing. Patsy Jones, her face harder than ever, leaned against the wall, a broken chair in her hands. And, lying on the floor, was Old Man Siccalon.

"What t'hell happened?" demanded Casey Mahoney.

By Jennigan panted, "That old fossil thought we oughta give him a bigger cut into that robbery money. He tied into me and if it hadn't been for my wife he'd a-killed me, I reckon. But the missus hit him over the head with that chair and hit him hard."

"You damned right I smacked him," said Patsy. The veneer was entirely gone now; she was cold, merciless. "No man's goin' to kill my husband and have me stand by and watch without doing anything." Her bleak eyes went to Jimmy O'Shane. "So this kid came blundering along, huh? Well, maybe he is as dumb as his brother, at that. What'll we do with him?"

Casey Mahoney said, to By Jennigan, "Keep your gun on Jimmy," and went and knelt beside Old Man Siccalon. Big, bluff, he took the oldster's arm, thumbed it for a pulse. Then a bleak smile, cold and lingering, ran across his heavy mouth. He lifted his eyes to the woman.

"You hit him hard enough, Patsy, because he sure is dead now."

The woman's rouged face went

(Continued On Page 106)

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(Continued From Page 105)

pale. Her hands trembled. "We gotta get out of here," she declared. "A murder charge—they hang you for that! . . ."

Jimmy growled, "So this is the way it runs, huh?"

Mahoney said, savagely, "You keep your mouth shut!"

Jimmy saw the whole thing now. The pieces were falling into swift order; the whole thing was shaping up and taking sense. Two men hadn't held up the payroll train—a man and a woman had pulled the robbery with the woman remaining hidden in the brush and covering Casey Mahoney, who was in in the deal all the time, and therefore no trouble to her. . . .

AND where did Marty come in? That, too, was clear to Jimmy now. By Jennigan hated Marty—hated him for that beating Marty had given him, there in their penitentiary cell. This gang had wanted somebody to blame for this robbery to protect themselves. And they had laid the blame on Marty.

"So you played up to Marty, huh?" Jimmy accused the woman. "And him, just a kid, figured you were single, couldn't see through you; you were just makin' a fool outa him."

"That wasn't hard," said Patsy.

Mahoney said, "Grab that money sack, and get out of here," to By Jennigan, who took the sack from the table.

"What about the kid?" asked Jennigan.

"We'll take him back in the hills," said Mahoney. "Won't be hard to kill, and nobody'll find the body back in that desolation."

Jimmy was facing death, and he knew it. These three were ruthless, and already had one murder to account for. Another would make small moment to them. Mahoney had been in Sheriff Nelson's office, had heard the sheriff say he was going to search for that stolen money. By Jennigan had ridden out to the homestead to hide the money there. . . .

Old Man Siccalon had been in on it, too, hiding their horses and the stolen money. And the woman? Jimmy pondered over that, and

(Continued On Page 108)

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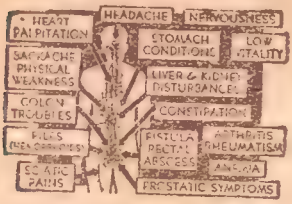

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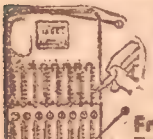

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(Continued From Page 106)

couldn't see just where and why she was essential to this gang, outside of being Jennigan's wife.

Mahoney grabbed him, pushed him hard out the door. Jimmy almost fell as he was propelled into the twilight. Burning anger and resentment fought inside of him. He had figured Mahoney a man, and Mahoney had robbed—or helped rob—the company he worked for. . . .

Mahoney grabbed him again, collared him. Jimmy knew better than to fight the big man, because if he did, Mahoney might kill him. What would he do to get loose? That thought ran across his busy mind.

It was dark in the barn. Gradually Jimmy's eyes became accustomed to the gloomy interior. They went to their horses. "Where's your bronc?" demanded Casey Mahoney. The engineer's eyes were bloodshot.

"Up on the hill," said Jimmy.

Casey Mahoney jerked the catch-rope from his saddle. The woman and By Jennigan were tightening cinches. Mahoney said, harshly, "Turn around, kid, and put your hands behind you!"

Jimmy did. Just then, though, a voice from the shadows by the back door said, "What's going on here?"

THERE was a moment's pause. A heavy pause, freighted with danger. The woman and By Jennigan turned and stared at the two men who stood there, guns up. Two men who had been hiding in the manger.

Casey Mahoney dropped the rope. He said, "Well, now, if it ain't Sheriff Nelson and Matt Hawkins. Good evening, gentlemen."

Mahoney had his hand on his gun. So did By Jennigan. Patsy Jennigan stared, her eyes showing fear now, instead of hardness.

Sheriff Nelson asked, "What's goin' on here, Jimmy?"

"They're thieves!" Jimmy tried to keep his voice level but he couldn't. "That sack—the one that Jennigan has—it has the stolen payroll—"

Things happened fast then. Jennigan was crouching, pulling his gun. The woman was screaming, screech-

(Continued On Page 110)

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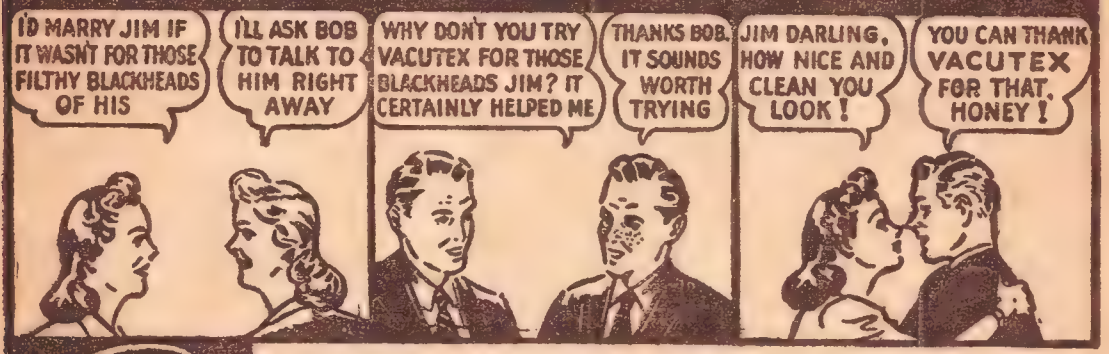

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(Continued From Page 108)

ing. Horses reared and fought their tie-ropes. And Matt Hawkins' .45 was yammering.

Jimmy knew that Sheriff Nelson would not shoot at Mahoney because the lawman would probably hit him, not Mahoney. And Jimmy knew that this would give Mahoney a chance to pull and kill the sheriff. Jimmy grabbed the engineer's arm just as he was reaching. He hung on desperately, biting the brawny forearm.

Casey Mahoney grunted, brought his fist around, slammed it against Jimmy's face. The crushing blow knocked the boy aside, stunning him. He landed against the manger, the world a blur. He glimpsed By Jennigan going down, Matt Hawkins' bullets in him. There was a blur then, and he fought to keep consciousness. Next thing he knew, Matt Hawkins was helping him up.

The foreman's voice was strangely tender. "You all right, Jimmy? Damn him, if he's hurt you—"

Jimmy grinned. "I'll live." He looked at Casey Mahoney, there on the ground. And then at Sheriff Nelson, who was wiping his bloody gun on his pant leg.

"Beefed him," said the lawman, grinning.

"How'd you get here?" asked Jimmy.

"We followed you out of town," said Matt Hawkins. "The sheriff was suspicious of you since this afternoon, and he wanted me along. Tell us, what happened?"

Jimmy did. While he talked, Sheriff Nelson knelt beside By Jennigan, his gun on the woman, who also knelt beside her husband. "He's dead," said the lawman tonelessly. He looked at the sobbing woman. "Jimmy's evidence would send you to the gallows, I reckon—that is, if they hung women in Wyoming, which they don't. But you might just as well talk because you got a life sentence ahead of you."

She broke down and talked. And then Jimmy really understood her part in this. She had worked the black horse over with dyes and beauty preparations and made him look like Midnight. "And if it hadn't been for that kid there—"

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Matt Hawkins put his arm around Jimmy's shoulders and shook him playfully. "We better get this mess into town and get Marty turned loose. Me, I once said I'd make a man outa you, but you're that already. Tomorrow you hand those water buckets to somebody else and you take a team of four horses and a fresno out on the grade. From now on, you're drawing man's pay."

"And Marty?"

"We got a job for him, too."

Sheriff Nelson was getting the blubbering, slobbering Mahoney to his feet. Jimmy had a lump in his throat. "A man can make some serious mistakes," he said slowly. "Now me, I figured that Mahoney was—" He fumbled for words.

"Any man'll make mistakes," said Matt Hawkins. "Only thing he has to watch is that he don't make too many. How about that fresno job, kid?"

"Four horses," said Jimmy, "and a fresno. Come mornin', hand me those ribbons, Matt!"

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Raw, Medium and Well-Done

(Continued From Page 91)

tries to remove your hairpants and spurs. That's all, gents!"

Ten minutes later I corral Horse Tooth in front of the bally-stand and whinny for some inside information.

"What's the gaff?" I says. "Tell papa!"

"You mean you didn't get the angle?" he asks, with the greatest of innocence. "It was as simple as falling off a greased pig!"

"Not from where I stood," I says. "I thought the professor got away with all them gold pieces!"

"Well," says Horse Tooth, "he *did* scoop something off that table, but if he can spend it, I'm a bowlegged giraffe."

"So?"

"So, last night I got the boys together, gave them the lowdown, and when we got finished with the frame, the professor was the picture. To each one of the boys who was gonna slap a gold piece on the table I give something cute."

"Continue."

"It was a lead and zinc disk, same size as a twenty-dollar gold piece," says Horse Tooth. "So when the professor calls for the dough, all he gets are the disks. Not bad, huh?"

"Where'd you get the disks?"

"Oh, I had 'em in my trunk for years. They were advertisements, from back East. One side says *Present this to your grocer and receive a free cake of Everclean Soap.* The other side says, *Good luck to everybody.* Not bad; huh?"

"Nope," I admits, "not bad!"

(THE END)

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BE A RADIO ELECTRONICIAN

I SUPPLY A FULL RADIO SET *for practical easy* LEARNING

NOW! YOU CAN PREPARE AT HOME IN SPARE TIME FOR AMAZING OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD IN RADIO - ELECTRONICS - TELEVISION

The offer I make you here is the opportunity of a lifetime. It's your big chance to get ready for a wonderful future in the swiftly expanding field of Radio Electronics INCLUDING Radio, Television, Frequency Modulation and Industrial Electronics. Be wise! NOW'S the time to start. Opportunities ahead are tremendous! No previous experience is necessary. The Sprayberry Course starts right at the beginning of Radio. You can't get lost. It gets the various subjects across in such a clear, simple way that you understand and remember. And, you can master my entire course in your spare time. It will not interfere in any way with your present duties. Along with your Training, You will receive my famous **BUSINESS BUILDERS** which will show you how to make some nice profits while learning.

Prepares You for a Business of Your Own or Good Radio Job

My training will give you the broad, fundamental principles so necessary as a background, no matter which branch of Radio you wish to specialize in. I make it easy for you to learn Radio Set Repair and Installation Work. I teach you how to install and repair Electronic Equipment. In fact, you'll be a fully qualified RADIO-ELECTRONICIAN, equipped with the skill and knowledge to perform efficiently and to make a wonderful success of yourself.

SPRAYBERRY TRAINING GIVES YOU BOTH TECHNICAL KNOWLEDGE — SKILLED HANDS

There's only one right way to learn Radio Electronics. You must get it through simplified lesson study combined with actual "shop" practice under the personal guidance of a qualified Radio Teacher. It's exactly this way that Sprayberry trains you . . . supplying real Radio parts for learn-by-doing experience right at home. Thus, you learn faster, your understanding is clear-cut, you acquire the practical "know how" essential to a good-paying Radio job or a Radio business of your own.

I'll Show You a New, Fast Way To Test Radio Sets Without Manufactured Equipment

The very same Radio Parts I supply with your Course for gaining pre-experience in Radio Repair work may be adapted through an exclusive Sprayberry wiring procedure to serve for complete, fast, accurate Radio Receiver trouble-shooting. Thus, under Sprayberry methods, you do not have one cent of outlay for manufactured Test Equipment which is not only expensive but scarce.

DON'T PUT IT OFF!

Get the facts about my training—now! Take the first important step toward the money-making future of your dreams. All features are fully explained in my big, illustrated FREE catalog which comes to you along with another valuable FREE book you'll be glad to own. Mail Coupon AT ONCE!

ATTENTION VETERANS!

The Sprayberry Radio-Electronics Home Study Course has been fully approved for Veterans Training under the G. I. Bill of Rights. This is important to you! It's your opportunity to get our complete Radio Training through Government grant. Find out about your eligibility AT ONCE!

JUST OUT! FREE! "How to Read Radio Diagrams and Symbols"

. . . a valuable new book which explains in simple English how to read and understand any Radio Set Diagram. Provides the quick key to analyzing any Radio Circuit. Includes translations of all Radio symbols. Send for this FREE book now, and along with it I will send you another big FREE book describing my Radio-Electronic training.

GET FREE BOOKS

SPRAYBERRY ACADEMY OF RADIO

F. L. Sprayberry, President
Room 6316, Pueblo, Colorado.

Please rush my FREE copies of "How to MAKE MONEY in RADIO, ELECTRONICS and TELEVISION," and "HOW TO READ RADIO DIAGRAMS and SYMBOLS."

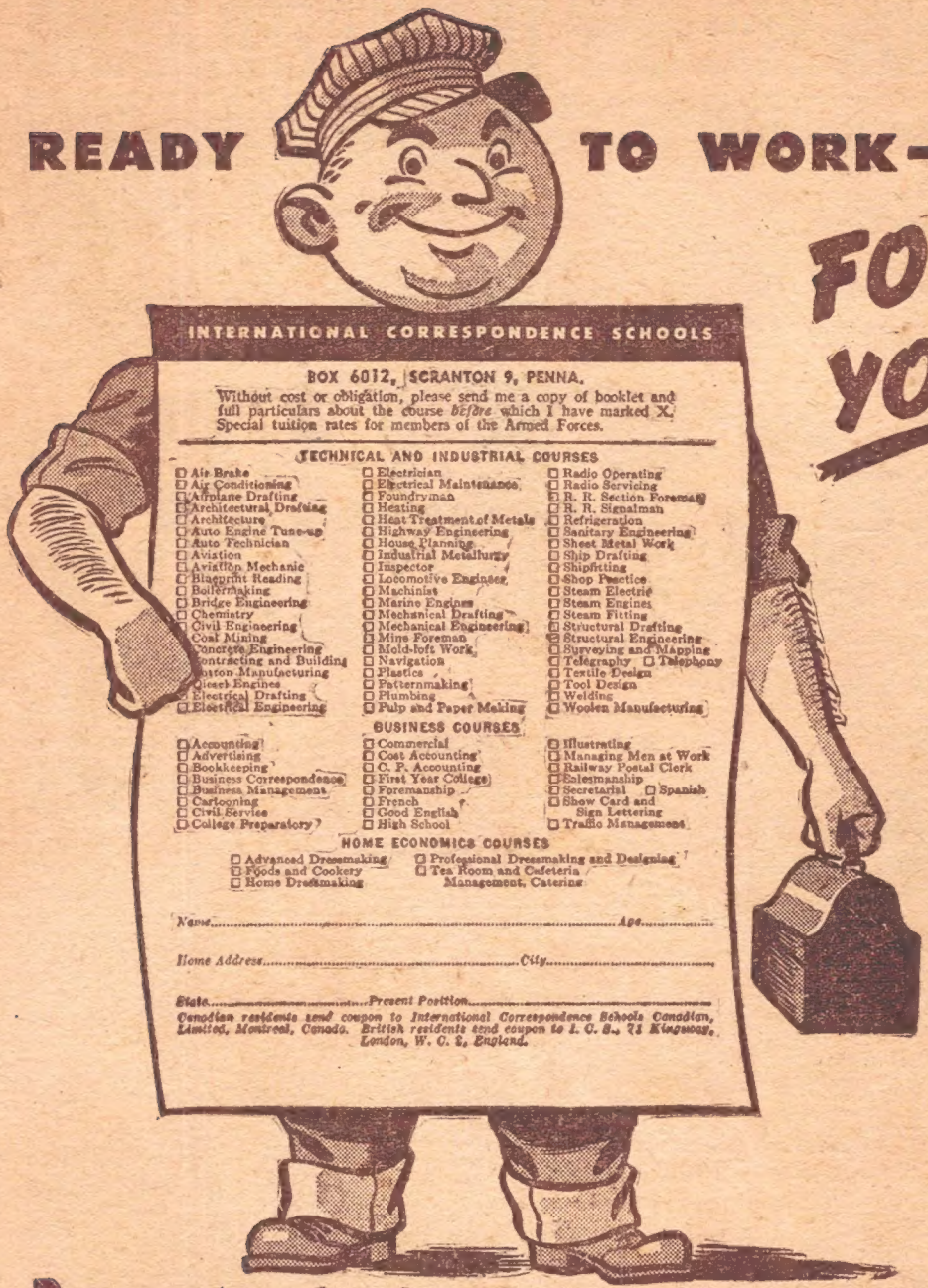
Name ..... Age ...

Address .....

City ..... State .....

(Mail in plain envelope or paste on penny postcard)

READY TO WORK— FOR YOU!



INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

BOX 6012, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

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- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Airplane Drafting
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Auto Engine Tune-up
- ☐ Auto Technician
- ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Aviation Mechanic
- ☐ Blueprint Reading
- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Bridge Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Concrete Engineering
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Diesel Engines
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electrician
- ☐ Electrical Maintenance
- ☐ Foundryman
- ☐ Heating
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ House Planning
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
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Name..... Age.....

Home Address..... City.....

State..... Present Position.....

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